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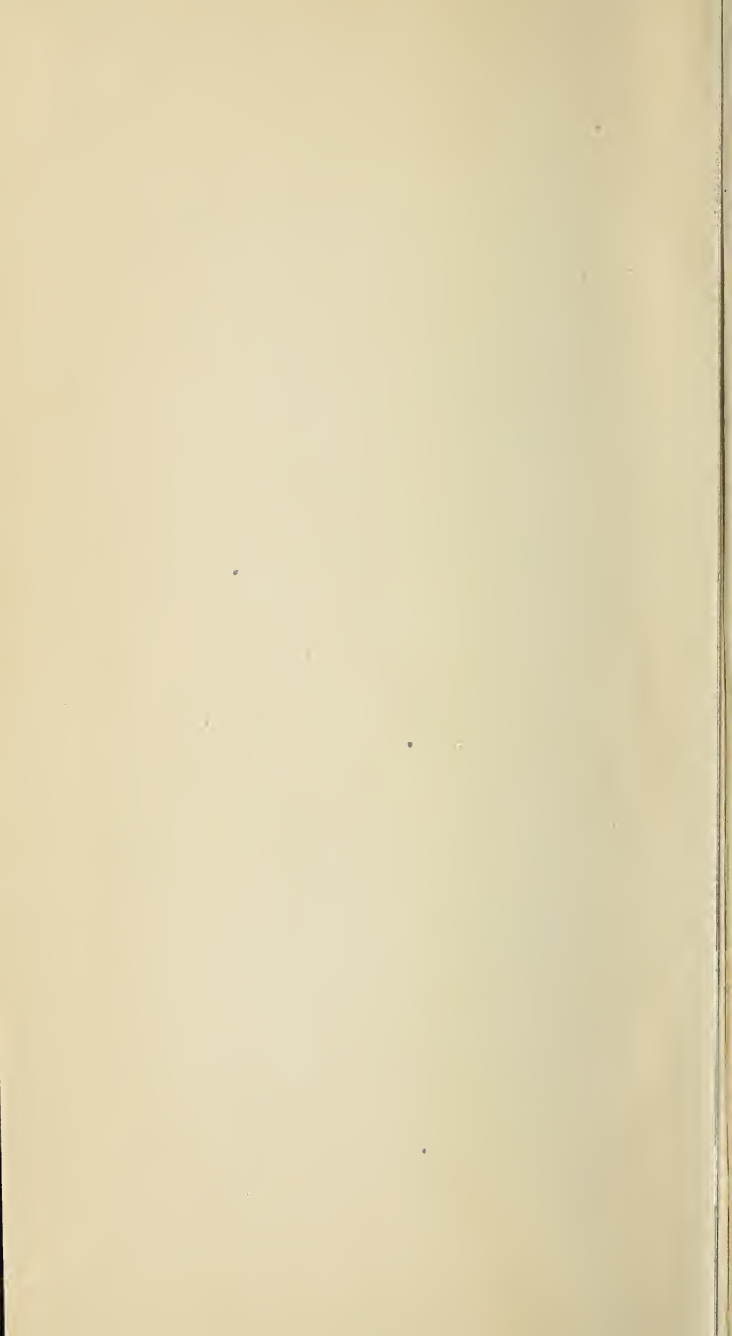
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ILLUSTRATIONS

OF

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UNITARIAN CHRISTIANITY,

CONSISTING CHIEFLY OF

PRACTICAL AND MORAL APPLICATIONS OF  
ITS PRINCIPLES.

IN

A SERIES OF DISCOURSES.

BY WILLIAM HINCKS, F.L.S.

LONDON:

JOHN CHAPMAN, 121, NEWGATE STREET.

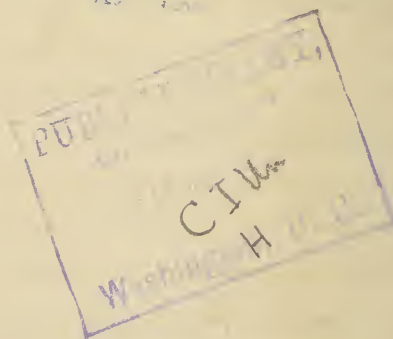
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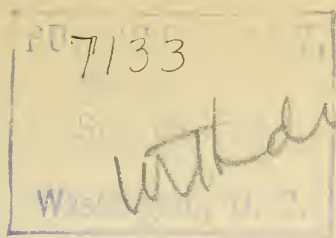
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## P R E F A C E.

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THIS Volume originates in the Author's deep conviction, that every doctrine has a definite practical tendency; and when at all seriously believed and considered, produces a real influence on the character. Hence, in the course of his preaching, he has made it an especial object to trace and exhibit the effects of the doctrines which he receives as true, and occasionally of those to which he is opposed; and he has been led to think, that a selection of Discourses of this character might have some novelty, and a good deal of utility.

He has by no means attempted a regular examination of the influences to be expected from the distinguishing doctrines of Unitarian Christianity; and there are even many important points to which he has not at all adverted, simply because

some selection was necessary, and the Discourses contained in the present Volume, as they passed under his review, seemed to him suitable to his design. Some of these will, at first sight, appear little connected with the distinguishing features of Unitarianism; but on examination it will be found, that in every one of them the practical influence is immediately derived from a doctrinal view held by Unitarian Christians only, and sometimes by but a small part of them. The Author, however, could but exhibit and carry out into their consequences his own views, which he submits to the candid consideration of the public. The materials in hand would at once have furnished another volume; but it seemed better to offer only a moderate portion at one time, so as to have the opportunity of judging how far the subject is calculated to interest the generality of readers, and is likely to be usefully pursued.

The writer is fully aware how many of the practical influences of Christianity, including some of the most important, are common to believers in the most opposite creeds—and these furnish a

large proportion of the topics for preaching. Accordingly, he does not here give those of his own Discourses which, on the whole, he deems most valuable, but a series directed to the illustration of a particular subject, which, in his opinion, ordinarily receives less attention than it deserves. His desire is to do something to promote piety and holiness, as resulting from the knowledge of the truth, and reflection upon it; and he humbly commits his work to the Divine blessing.

*Garden Place, Hampstead.*

*January 5th, 1845.*





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# DISCOURSES.

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## ATTACHMENT TO OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH.

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ROMANS VIII. 38, 39.

“For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

THE apostle having shown in opposition to Judaizing bigots that God could not reject or condemn those whom he had called to the privilege of the Gospel, in consequence of their non-observance of a ceremonial law, proceeds to urge the greatness of the blessings bestowed by him through Christ, as a reason why no persecution or suffering, no difficulty or trial of whatsoever kind, should cause any sincere believer to renounce those advantages of which he had become a partaker, or cut himself off from the enjoyment of those inestimable benefits which so much love had been displayed in communicating.

“What,” he asks, “shall separate us from the

love of Christ?" (shall cause us to refuse and abandon the blessings which he has been the means of conveying to us.) "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?" Though our case should be such as is expressed in these words of Scripture: "*For thy sake we are exposed to death all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter; yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.*" So exalted are the privileges, so inestimable the hopes which we enjoy, that they much more than counterbalance all the evils to which for the sake of our religion we can be exposed.

"For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life," (neither the fear of the one, nor the hope of securing the other,) "nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers," (it is most probable that the word 'angels' is here applied to officers of the Jewish church, and that the whole meaning is, nor any authorities, whether religious or civil,) "nor things present, nor things to come," (neither present afflictions, nor the fear of future sufferings,) "nor height, nor depth," (the proper translation would seem to be, nor *exaltation* nor *depression*—neither the seductions of prosperity, nor the terrors of adversity,) "nor any other thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in

Christ Jesus our Lord" (shall cause us voluntarily to give up our share in that greatest good, the manifestation of God's love through Christ Jesus our Lord).

In considering this passage we cannot but be forcibly impressed with the very high estimate formed by the apostle, of the blessings of the Gospel, which he so warmly and eloquently expresses, and we are led to inquire whether we have a proper sense of its importance, or a becoming feeling of grateful attachment to our holy calling. Allowances we must make for some differences between our case and that of those who first received the Christian faith. It had to them the charm and the power of novelty; to us its features are familiar even from infancy,—it never could be thought of by them, but in contrast with the hard servitude of the law, which, reduced to little better than an external form, allowed the evasion of the most important duties, and retained little of its original character besides the exclusive spirit which belonged to its temporary purpose, or the degrading superstitions of heathenism which directly sanctioned and encouraged the grossest immoralities: we are scarcely acquainted from personal observation with any opposing system of religion and morals, and find even those who reject its authority admitting many of its

truths, and putting forth, as if derived from other sources, many of its precepts. They had felt in themselves a change of principles, dispositions and conduct so complete, as to be justly compared to being born again and being newly created. Too many among us remain through life in that religious state in which the circumstances of early education placed us; those who feel most the progressive influences of religion, and who are, as we all ought to be, growing better through life, improving both in the understanding and application of divine truths, are yet conscious of no remarkable contrast between their present and any former state, and only those who have gone through some great revolution of religious opinions, or been suddenly brought to a sense of the importance of religion which they had previously neglected, can have feelings in this respect at all similar to those of the first believers.

I might add the awakening effect of the actual presence of miraculous gifts: the call on those who enjoyed such aids exclusively to devote themselves to the diffusion of their new faith, and the well-known influence of persecution on all who entertain any serious conviction in exciting their ardour and increasing their attachment to a cause which they believe to be that of truth and of God.

We have reason on the whole to be very thank-

ful to God that our interest in our religion is not stimulated by such excitements as those which were applied to the earliest disciples of our master—the last mentioned indeed to many of their followers in after times; and if in consequence we ordinarily exhibit less intensity of feeling, we may hope that by a just and merciful God this circumstance will not be imputed to us as a sin. But yet, when, independently of any peculiarities affecting the condition of the first Christians, derived either from the evils of their previous state, or from the machinery employed in establishing our religion in the world, we attempt to bring under our notice no more than a slight sketch of the blessings we enjoy through the Gospel, it surely cannot appear to us that the strongest expressions respecting its value are, as applied to our case, unreasonable, or that the most ardent and animated assurances of our unchangeable and grateful adherence to it, are any thing more than would be called forth from us by a just sense of our obligations and our wants.

When we consider that by Christianity only the treasures of Jewish theology have been opened to us and to mankind at large; that before our Lord's time the Jewish people stood alone in the world in receiving the doctrines of a pure and sublime theism, and in professing obedience to a



moral law, which, notwithstanding its association with ritual observances adapted only to an early state of society, notwithstanding its accommodations to the hardheartedness of an ignorant and barbarous age, and the exclusiveness of spirit which belonged to the object of keeping one nation separate though for the ultimate benefit of all, exhibits more of purity, benevolence and practical adaptation to promote the virtue and happiness of man, than any other which the world had seen; that even when the Jewish Law was corrupted and ready to be superseded, and when the intellectual progress of mankind was such that they might be considered as capable of profiting by a better system, there were yet very few amongst other nations who had acquired a knowledge of the simplest principles of religion and morality, whilst those few neither duly applied them, nor at all attempted to diffuse them through the mass of society; that on the contrary the spread of Christianity—a spiritualized and perfected Judaism—was surprisingly rapid, and its influence on the lives of those who embraced it (however in after times modified by corruptions which were introduced) was undeniable and extraordinary. When we consider these plain and unquestionable facts, we cannot hesitate to ascribe the greater and more important part of the knowledge we possess re-



specting our Creator, his perfections, his government and his will, on which what is advantageous both in our intellectual and moral condition chiefly depends, to the Gospel of Christ. *Now*, when the gross darkness is dispelled, it is easy for men to justify the truth of revelation by arguments from nature, and, calling them natural religion, to reject or undervalue the original source of the light they enjoy—or to suppose that if God spoke at all he must have had something more and different to communicate; but inquiry and reflection show us that but for the “love of God, as manifested in Christ Jesus our Lord,” we might even yet be in a state of Heathen darkness, utterly destitute of those truths and principles on which all that is desirable in our religious and social state depends. Let us add the considerations that the Gospel offers to us the privilege of being called the children of God, and teaches us to regard him as our kind and compassionate father; that it removes those anxious doubts and fears which a sense of our own frailty, and of the many sins into which we have fallen, and of the perfect holiness and justice of our great ruler and judge, must otherwise occasion, by showing us that we owe every thing to his mercy, and that this mercy is freely offered to all who seek it in sincere repentance and endeavours after improvement; and that above all, it

gives us the assurance of a future existence, that which has been often desired, but scarcely ever firmly believed, with any rational and useful view of its nature, except upon this warrant—which certainly never was believed in any manner that could be of the least practical utility before its light was diffused. On the importance of this grand doctrine in giving their greatest efficacy to all the motives to virtue, moderating our earthly desires, checking our anxieties respecting the changes of the present scene, and consoling us amidst those bereavements to which we are all from time to time exposed, it would be needless now to enlarge: it is plain that even if it be granted, which is very doubtful, that some knowledge of this most interesting of all truths was afforded to the servants of God in earlier times, and that the writings of the Old Testament contain some indications of its having been received, it is not the less true that *we owe our* acquaintance with it to the Gospel. It is not the less true that the manner in which it is there taught, and the example afforded in the resurrection of our blessed Lord, and the clear proofs of his communications with his disciples after he had left this world, are of unspeakable value for giving the doctrine its full influence both in the way of motive and of consolation.

Christianity enlightens us respecting the being on whom we constantly depend, directs us in the way of duty, inspires us with a disinterested love of our fellow creatures, consoles us under disappointment and affliction, teaches us how to make our trials useful to us, elevates our minds above the meaner cares and too engrossing pursuits of this world, and gives us a firm and joyful expectation of a better and happier world to come. This consolatory, purifying and ennobling faith is found to be equally adapted at once to all the varieties of external condition, and to every period in the progress of the human species. It needs but to be fully understood and faithfully applied, to accomplish all the wishes of philanthropy respecting the destinies of our race, whilst even he whose ignorance perverts and corrupts many things cannot study its records without being excited to works of charity, and aided sometimes almost in defiance of his speculative system in the improvement of his own character.

Such, my brethren, is (in a general view of it) the blessing we have received. Let us not omit to notice the mode of its communication. Had the great prophet of God been received and honoured as he deserved to be, had his life been one of prosperity and worldly exaltation, and his fulfilment of his Father's will required from him

no sacrifices, the most distant ages must still have continued to bless him as the chosen instrument of a most beneficent divine dispensation ; as one who, under his Father's direction, well employed all his powers and distinctions in promoting the lasting welfare of his brethren. I need not remind you how very far this is from having been the fact. I need not recall to you his life of suffering, or his death of agony ; I need not repeat to you that his mission was to endure toil, and disappointment, and ingratitude, and persecution, and finally to shed his blood for the good of mankind. You know that his glory was reserved for him in heaven, that here he had to undergo the severest sufferings, with no other consolation than what piety towards his Father, and the prospect of the future triumphs and blessings of his religion, could afford. Great indeed was the love which he displayed—great the love of God, “who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, that with him he might also freely give us all good things !”

Shall anything then separate us from the love of Christ? Shall anything—for such appears to be the meaning of this phrase, as employed by the apostle—cause us to renounce all participation in, or acknowledgment of, the blessing of his religion? It is very evident that we do so when we either

deny his divine authority, or practically neglect his precepts and promises, giving ourselves up to those passions and pursuits which he condemns.

When the apostle wrote, the chief cause from which an abandonment of the blessings of the Gospel was to be apprehended was persecution, to which therefore he almost exclusively refers, when he expresses in the words of the text his confidence in the stability of his Christian brethren; yet when he concludes, "nor exaltation, nor depression, nor any other thing," he must probably be understood to speak of the dangerous influences of great prosperity or adversity, and he suggests to us an inquiry what else there may be by which we, any of us, are peculiarly tempted.

Through the mercy of God we are saved from the temptations of persecution, and can only, as we admire the noble firmness of those who have passed through them with constancy, hope that, in similar circumstances, we should not disgrace our profession, and pray that we may be enabled to meet, with a kindred fortitude, the trials of whatsoever kind by which our faith may be exercised.

Greatly as they differ in the manner of their approach, we cannot safely conclude that they are really much less dangerous than those, by triumphing over which martyrs and confessors have acquired their imperishable crown. The allurements

of sinful pleasure, and the seducing snares of vain amusement and fashionable folly, are more successful than the threats of power, or the terrors of persecution, in alienating the hearts of many from those objects which should engage their warmest affections, and excite their liveliest interests. The flowing stream of wealth and worldly prosperity more easily overthrows the landmarks of principle, and uproots the living fences of virtuous feeling, than the transient fury of the storm, with which they are assailed by tyrannical and wicked men. "The laughter of fools," though not so formidable, is practically not less difficult to be despised and defied than the dungeon or the stake; and if we could compare the number of truths which have been abandoned, of virtuous sentiments which have been obliterated, of pious and holy affections whose rising flame has been extinguished, to avoid the contempt, the ridicule, and the sneers of those votaries of fashion and pleasure, who really constitute one of the most worthless portions of the community—with the sacrifices of conscience which have been extorted from human weakness by the fear of suffering, we should probably find the former as much exceeding in numerical amount, as it must appear to do in the degree of delinquency. The lapse of time, though it has so strangely altered the aspect of external things, as



to attach whatever danger there is of injury from society rather to the rejection than the acceptance of Christianity, has not, nevertheless, made it easy and suitable to the worldly-minded to receive the Gospel in its genuine influences, and it is too obvious how possible it is to separate ourselves altogether from the benefits of Christ's love, even whilst we consider it essential to be called his disciples. But to minds of a certain class, there is in these times a temptation positively to renounce the alleged benefits of the Gospel, and to make light of the display of God's love through Christ Jesus, arising from the appearance of boldness of thought, and freedom of spirit, which such conduct carries with it, and from the gratification of intellectual pride, which the encouragement of sceptical doubts eminently affords. Though I cannot but regard as fit subjects for *pity* those who are deprived of the confidence which a belief in revelation can alone give, respecting the great objects of faith, I would willingly do my part to encourage the sincere, humble, and candid, in the hope, that whilst they act according to the light they possess, their Father will accept their services; and though I must look upon them as deprived of most valuable sources of spiritual strength and consolation, I gladly acknowledge that much yet remains which, in the present state of knowledge, they may well

appropriate to themselves, and by the use of which they may make no small advances in true wisdom and virtue. He must have very false notions of Christianity who does not respect the disbelief which is the effect of strong though unreasonable impressions made by the corruptions of religion on the better feelings of the heart, or of any deliberate and calm decision of the judgment, however contrary to the general sense of the wisest and best-judging part of mankind, as well as to our own deepest convictions: but if any unacknowledged dislike of the restraints on the conduct which religion imposes, and which, though dictated by paternal kindness for our own real good, may, in their strictness, be repugnant to many who call themselves virtuous, because they have no love for gross excesses—if any levity, rashness, or pride, in opposing the sentiments of those deemed our superiors in knowledge and judgment—if any vain gratification in the ingenuity of pushing objections, or in the boldness of rendering ourselves obnoxious to the world in general, should, as is often the case, be justly ranked among the leading causes of our unbelief, or if we encourage a hesitating and sceptical habit, tending more to question than to apply important principles, and turning to the great topics of religion rather for the exercise of intellectual acumen, than the culti-



vation of good dispositions and affections—there can be no presumption in pronouncing, that we incur a most serious responsibility. The gift of the Gospel involved in it the sufferings of many good men, who devoted themselves to its service. The great messenger of God himself, in finishing the work which was given him to do—in accomplishing our deliverance from the power and misery of sin—was obliged, after the sacrifice, throughout his active life, of every outward good and every worldly blessing, to humble himself, so as to become obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. The love which made him cheerfully submit to all his Father's will cannot be thought lightly of: we are not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from that degraded and wretched state of mind and conduct which was continued by tradition from one generation to another among our fathers, but by the precious blood of Christ. O, may we not be tempted to despise so great a salvation, but whilst we walk in the light of knowledge, and pursue the path of sober and rational inquiry, find the religion which can most effectually control our conduct, and which calls into most active exercise all our pure and benevolent affections, capable, also, of satisfying our judgment, and securing our grateful and humble acceptance.

In few words, I shall now remind you, my brethren, how it is natural and requisite that we should show our sense of the blessings of the Gospel, and our determination that none of the changes of the world shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our Master came to free us from the bondage of ignorance, and sin, and death; to render accessible to all, those treasures of divine knowledge and pious sentiment which had previously been confined to the use of one people—putting an end to the temporary peculiarities of Judaism—and to add whatever improvements of precept, whatever further communications of truth, mankind, now emerging from childhood, might require for their further unassisted progress; he came, by his whole life, to give us an example of the most exalted excellence to which human nature can attain—and whilst he perfected that example in his death, to afford in his resurrection and certain active existence after his departure from this world, at once a pledge and a pattern of that resurrection which he announced for his followers, with all the authority of his heavenly commission. From this account it plainly appears what must be expected from his disciples—to live under the constant influence of the principles of pure religion, and in

the strict and habitual observance of his holy precepts, loving and revering him, to cherish in their own hearts his spirit of piety and benevolence, and to act always with reference to that better state to which he directs their hopes.

In a constant regard to the perfections and government of God, and a truly filial reverence and love towards him, producing cheerful obedience to his commands, humble resignation to his appointments, and genuine delight in the study of his works and plans; in the heart which so many evil passions assail, and upon which so many unworthy desires intrude, being guarded with unceasing watchfulness, and with daily care purified for his holy service; in the sense of our common relationship to him who, though partial and temporary evil may be necessary for his providential dispensations, regards all his creatures with equal love, producing the most ardent zeal for the service of all our brethren, and especially for the promotion of truth, knowledge, and virtue, on which their happiness must chiefly depend; in our high estimate of the treasures of the mind, and the graces of the heart and temper moderating our desires respecting external good; and in the full conviction of a future existence—the cherished hope of the happiness it will afford to the pure and good—the prospect of the sweet re-union it

promises with all the objects of our virtuous affections—soothing us under the pains, and giving us dignified composure amidst the sorrows, of life; in our just feeling and appreciation of the transcendent excellencies of our Lord's character, being shown by the sincerity of our efforts to transfuse them into our own; and our warm and grateful love towards him, animating our desire to walk in his footsteps, promoting his work of unspeakable love towards mankind. Thus it is we can show that our profession of being disciples of Jesus is not made in vain, and that, though not called to those trials in which his early followers proved the power of their faith, we can, whilst contemplating the scenes through which they passed, with sincerity, and with no vain affectation of despising what there is no probability of our being called to endure, but with a suitable reference in our thoughts to the different temptations which exercise us, express with the apostle a firm persuasion that "neither life, nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor exaltation, nor depression, nor any other thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

## RELIGIOUS TRUTH PRACTICALLY IMPORTANT.

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JOHN XVII. 25, 26.

“O righteous Father, the world hath not known thee: but I have known thee, and these have known that thou hast sent me. And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it; that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

THESE are the concluding words of the prayer with which our Lord closed his last discourse to his disciples. When he says—“The *world* hath *not known* thee,” he refers immediately to the great body of the Jewish people, and more especially to their rulers; and what he affirms of them is, that they have not understood the purposes of God’s providence in respect to the new dispensation of religion: they have not recognized his gracious plans—they have even rejected his messenger, though furnished with abundant proofs of a divine commission. “But,” Jesus goes on to say, “I have known thee,” *I* have fully understood all thy will in what relates to the all-important mission in which I am engaged, “and these,” my disciples, “have *known*,” have already been fully

convinced, "that thou hast sent me. And I have declared unto them thy name," I *have* made known to them, so far as they were as yet capable of receiving it, that doctrine concerning thee which is entrusted to me; those just views of thy relation to thy creatures, and thy will respecting them which I am sent to communicate, "and I will declare it;" when they are fitter to receive them (after the resurrection), I will make yet further communications: "that the love wherewith thou lovest me may be in them,"—that as by thy favour I have enjoyed extraordinary aids for publishing the glad tidings I have brought, they may, by the like favour, be assisted in the same glorious work—"and I in them,"—that they may also be completely united with me, entering into my views, acting in my spirit, and carrying forward what I have commenced.

This passage has suggested to my mind some reflections on the importance of the knowledge of God, and our duties in respect to it, which may, I hope, furnish us with profitable occupation for our present time.

Our Lord here attributes the criminal rejection of his claims by his misguided countrymen to their "not knowing God," not understanding his character and will, so as to be capable of appreciating his plan in the Gospel dispensation.



The moral character of this ignorance, on the most important of all subjects, will, of course, vary according to the opportunities afforded to different individuals for obtaining knowledge, and according to the nature of the obstacles which may prevent their making a good use of the opportunities they possess. He who has never heard of a holy and perfect ruler of the universe, partakes not in his guilt, who, having been instructed from childhood in a divine religion, has yet never profited by its doctrines; and he who is prevented from improving his knowledge only by indolence, or by a too eager devotion to worldly business, though guilty and justly answerable for his neglected opportunities, is yet by no means to be compared in guilt with that unhappy man whom pride, or the love of selfish gain or pleasure, and unwillingness to submit to the restraints of duty, causes to reject the knowledge which is offered to him and pressed upon his attention. But amidst all these differences of individual character, the general truth remains, that want of knowledge of God is a leading cause of wrong conduct and moral corruption. The natural propensities, external circumstances, and acquired habits of individuals, will so alter their several cases, as to produce all that variety which we observe in human character, even amongst those who have apparently the same means of im-

provement ; but amidst this variety it is still always true that as, upon all subjects, right knowledge is the only secure foundation for wise and successful action—so, especially in what concerns our relation to God as our creator, governor, and judge, it is of the utmost consequence that we should be rightly informed respecting his nature, attributes, and plans—and it is by no means to be expected, or even conceived of as possible, that we should attain to the happiness of which we are capable without a considerable share of such knowledge. In order fully to understand and feel the importance of knowing God, we have but for a moment to turn our attention to the state of Pagans, whether in ancient times or even now, in those parts of the world to which the knowledge of the one only living and true God has not penetrated.

We can find scarcely any nation so degraded in its intellectual condition, as not to have recognized in the operations of nature the working of superhuman power and intelligence. It is impossible for beings constituted as we are to contemplate effects which resemble the results of human plans and human passions, without referring them to analogous causes. To the ignorant man who as yet knows nothing of general laws, each striking change appears to be the consequence of some



sudden purpose, or transient emotion of a being exalted above his own sphere, yet not essentially differing in character from himself: and since it requires long study, minute observation, and superior skill to discover the unity of purpose and harmony of action which prevail throughout the universe; as there are many instances of apparent opposition, inconsistency and confusion—which are only explained when considerable advances have been made in science—it would seem to follow that the ignorant are very likely, even as the consequence of applying to the subject some thought and ingenuity, to imagine the world to be governed in its different parts by a number of more or less independent deities, whose wills and whose plans may vary and interfere with each other. Thus imagination assigns its gods to the heaven, the earth and the sea; to the hills and to the vallies; to the woods and to the cultivated plains; to particular seasons, and to particular districts or nations: and what can be the effect of a belief in such contending powers, interfering purposes and limited resources, but to preclude altogether any real reverence for, or confidence in, any one being; to represent the rulers of nature as weak, capricious, and liable to be thwarted; as influenced by motives no higher than our own, and subject to passions only more tempestuous and

destructive than those of their votaries? Nor is this the worst: for when the wrath of a deity is supposed to be manifested in the storms; when the thunderbolt, famine and pestilence are regarded as instruments of his vengeance, it is but an easy step to attribute to him also other human passions. In the conception of his worshippers he is such a one as themselves, only, as that which constitutes his exaltation, more ready to take offence, more fierce in his anger, more insatiable in his revenge, more irregular and more triumphant in his lust. He becomes an example for the encouragement of every evil propensity, and in the fables which superstition believes, his actions sanctify all which wisdom and virtue would most strongly prohibit. Even his worship may become the direct means of producing and encouraging the most odious crimes. Is it wonderful that when such were the gods of the nations, it was accounted philosophy to deny their existence altogether? Is it strange that as infant science began to make known general laws, and to exhibit numerous appearances as *accounted* for, or capable of being expressed, by a few principles, it should for a time seem like true wisdom to reject as superstition all reference to the agency of superior beings, and to mistake uniform results for independent and inherent powers? No—we may well

maintain that a belief in some superior intelligence, a reference to some providential government and control over events, is essential to all that is most excellent and ennobling in human character; but it is equally certain that superstition debases the mind and corrupts the heart; that where the object of religious homage is weak, capricious and tyrannical, the confidence and reverence of piety can have no existence; that where his actions are considered as the sport of passion, or the subject of a blind fate, he can be honoured only by the destruction of the feeling of moral obligation in his worshippers; where crimes are ascribed to him which would disgrace humanity, the worst and lowest propensities of our frail nature will take encouragement from the example, and too many will be found eager to follow where a god is reported to have led the way.

If we must look to paganism for the most shocking and debasing effects of not knowing God, we need however be at no loss for illustrations of the evils of such ignorance among those who have been favoured with greater advantages, and who have certainly made far nearer approaches to the truth. The Jews were taught to acknowledge and adore one only God, the Creator and Governor of the universe, uncontrollable in power, supreme in wisdom, holy, righteous and bene-

volent in his conduct towards his people : from these pure and sublime principles they derived unquestionable benefit, and were raised by them in their moral and social condition far above surrounding nations ; but when, misunderstanding the purpose of their selection as a peculiar people, they imagined themselves the special favourites of heaven, and all other nations to be neglected or regarded with enmity, did not the evil effect of this great error manifest itself in arrogant assumptions of superiority, and in contempt or hatred, or at the least an entire abstinence from all good offices, towards those who belonged not to their privileged race ? And when, mistaking the outward forms necessary to command the attention, and engage the interest, of an ignorant and carnal-minded people, in an early stage of their social progress, for the substance of that religion which they were only intended to assist in its operation—they imagined themselves safe by the observance of these forms, even in the neglect of justice, mercy and faithfulness, was not this ignorance of God's nature and plans productive of most serious and alarming evils ? So amongst our brethren of the Christian church. That the sincere and consistent of all sects and parties are greatly blessed in the possession of our holy faith, it would seem to me unreasonable and irreconcilable

with plain facts, as well as illiberal, to doubt. There is much of what our Saviour has taught and commanded which cannot be mistaken, and his faithful followers never fail to exhibit in their conduct and characters some beautiful traces of their having learned of him. They are through his instructions animated to virtuous exertion, strengthened in temptation, consoled in sorrow, and inspired with the delightful hope of eternal blessedness. But if without being blinded by sectarian prejudice, and having our judgments perverted by party feeling, we cannot be insensible to the excellencies of our brethren, or refuse to acknowledge them as the fair fruits of the Christian truths which they receive, neither can we avoid noticing in the characteristic peculiarities of different sects, manifest results of certain parts of their doctrinal system, which to our judgment may appear erroneous. The evil consequences of erroneous opinions may arise in two ways, either in the smaller proportion of those professing the opinions, or at least having been instructed in them, who attain to superior excellence of character, or in the bad qualities and wrong influences which tinge and modify the excellence which is attained. If religion is made chiefly to consist in a mysterious faith repugnant to our natural reason, although many of its beneficial influences

may remain unaffected, it becomes naturally offensive to the strongest minds, and drives numbers of the most promising of those whom it should guide and control, into a scepticism which blights the best hopes and most ennobling affections, and is too commonly accompanied by moral corruption; if religion is made to consist too much in external ceremonies and bodily mortifications, or in attendance on services, giving money for certain approved purposes and other outward manifestations of zeal and piety, it will happen that such acts will by many be substituted for the feelings which they are supposed only to display, and that superstitious trust in the mere performance of ceremonial duties, or hypocritical pretensions to more interest in religion than is really possessed, will prevail to the injury of sincere piety and genuine goodness. Many may escape these unfavourable influences through peculiar advantages of education or natural disposition, but very many will suffer by them to a greater or less extent; and whilst they exist, the mixture of error with truth, in what relates to God and our duties towards him, can never be deemed unimportant. Granting God to be the one, undivided and alone perfect being that we believe him to be, the error of that great body of Christians whom we designate as the Trinitarians, though adopted



by them with the best intentions and most honest convictions; though originating only in obscure language and the false philosophy of a dark age attempting to express the important truth as to the degree in which God was with Jesus; and though that language be so uncertain in its meaning, that various shades of real opinion may shelter themselves under its use—notwithstanding I say all this, the error cannot be uninfluential. It is sufficiently injurious were it only in creating needless mystery and perplexity to all reflecting persons. It is still more so by dividing religious affections which it is important to concentrate, embarrassing the mind with doubts as to which person of the Deity claims its gratitude for each particular gift, or ought to be petitioned for each particular blessing, and representing different divine attributes as in a manner opposing one another, and making a sort of compromise in the scheme of salvation, instead of all uniting to produce one harmonious and perfect plan. No doubt it must be acknowledged by all whom bigotry has not totally blinded, however strongly opposed to these sentiments, that there is very much of sincere piety and genuine goodness among Trinitarians. Sad indeed it would be if there were not—but does this doctrine tend as much to produce and to maintain true piety—is

it a view of the Divine Nature as satisfactory to the reason—affording as much assistance in the fulfilment of the first and great command, as much pleasure in the contemplation of the character and relation to us of our God and Father—as that which is opposed to it? I humbly think not—and this is to think that men would be better for having their views of the Divine nature freed from this, which I apprehend to be an error. I need not apply at length the same kind of argument to the doctrine of Atonement, that of salvation by faith alone, or of the eternity of the torments of the wicked and unbelieving. They manifestly exercise a large influence on the minds of those who receive them. If they are true, this may probably be their intended and proper, as it appears to be their natural, influence; but I join,—and I trust not rashly and presumptuously, but after endeavouring to obtain the needful knowledge, and making the best use of the powers of judging I possess,—with those who think they are not taught in Scripture, and are not doctrines of the Christian revelation. If I am right, those who maintain them, so far “do not know God;” and can I doubt such serious mistakes being injurious to them? Can I hesitate to attribute directly to this cause, their appearing to be more zealous for their own creed



than for the great practical truths and common principles of our religion, their unseemly boldness in consigning their brethren to future perdition, and their excluding from the range of a charity, which in other respects deserves all praise, those who cannot be brought to accept their creed? Can I fail to perceive the practical danger to many minds—though many escape it—of reliance on the merits of another, and of denying holy dispositions and virtuous actions to be the sources and means of that Heavenly happiness to which the Gospel teaches us to aspire? Assuredly, my brethren, “the knowledge of God” is a great privilege and blessing—it cannot be indifferent whether, in any particular, we possess it or not. All good influences, all holy desires, all benevolent feelings, all cheering hopes, naturally spring from right views of his attributes, government, and designs, whilst we cannot possibly think him to *be*, to *require*, or to *decree*, otherwise than according to the truth, without our own feelings towards him or towards our fellow-creatures being thereby changed, and of course changed for the worse. Error cannot be *harmless*—it may be free from *moral guilt*. It may be restrained and counteracted by the truths with which it is combined, so as still to leave the character worthy of much respect and love; and since we are all so liable to

error, and the most favourably situated still probably retain so many errors, it would be most presumptuous in us to condemn our brethren because their feelings do not precisely agree with ours; but there is no presumption in the conviction that *truth* is *man's highest good*, the immediate source of all improvement, both in his mental and external condition—especially that *knowing God*, the author of his being, the disposer of his lot, the source of all his hopes and fears, must necessarily be for his good, whilst no mistake or false opinion respecting this being and his relation to us can fail of injuring either our characters or our happiness.

Let us now seriously inquire what duties appear to be incumbent upon us in consequence of that view of the real practical importance of all Divine truth which I have endeavoured to establish and to impress upon your minds. If we could be absolutely and infallibly sure of the truth of our own opinions, it would immediately follow, from our conviction that the world's *not knowing God* is a principal cause of the prevalence of vice and misery, that we must spread the knowledge we possess by all possible means—with all the zeal which our desire to limit the sum of vice and misery would naturally produce in every benevolent mind. Even thus we should not be justified

in employing *violence*, or any kind of constraint or mere worldly influence, because these *are not* possible means of diffusing the convictions of our own minds; they may produce exterior conformity and verbal unity, but they never did or could produce the agreement of minds in receiving the same opinions, and they destroy the sincerity and corrupt the moral integrity of those whom they influence.

Even the certainty of the truth of our own views, then, could only in reason induce us, with untiring zeal and activity, in the spirit of love, by the instrumentality of argument and persuasion, recommending them only as the means of good and the source of pleasure to those who should receive them, to diffuse them through society: and let me entreat your attention to the inquiry, whether we are bound to anything less than this in the condition in which we actually stand. It is quite true that no human being can be *absolutely certain*, so as to be independent of all fact or argument which may be adduced against it, of the truth of any opinion he adopts, unless he have a feeling of its being communicated to him by Revelation, accompanied by some unequivocal external sign of his receiving such communication, so exhibited that others, as well as himself, can judge of its reality and miraculous character. This is the only

test which reason, or the history of Revelation, sanctions for distinguishing a divine communication, and such communication alone constitutes infallibility. Without such a sign we can have no sufficient security against being ourselves misled by the delusions of fancy, much less can we have any claim on the submission of others to our authority; and so far as we depend upon ourselves, we are undoubtedly all fallible beings—a sufficient reason against our ever attempting to guide the opinions of others by our authority or will: but if truth be an object of supreme importance, if it be attainable only by the examination of evidence, (and all men and all bodies of men, being fallible, there is no rule of faith so established as to be received without examination,) then it plainly follows that every man must seek out truth for himself, and that in proportion as he values his opinions, and is satisfied with their evidence, he ought to feel impelled to communicate them to others—not to impose them, but to recommend the reasons which have satisfied him, to the consideration of others: nor can it be doubtful, that in this process truth must gradually prevail over prejudice and error, until, in the sublime language of prophecy, the “earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the depths of the sea.”

Truths relating to God, the mind, and things

unseen, never spread so rapidly as the truths of physical science, which can be established by experiments immediately appealing to the senses; but they are not the less *truths*—their practical importance is even greater than that of the other class, and their tendency to diffuse themselves, as the result of inquiry, is not less certain. He who examines for himself, and makes use of the means of knowledge he possesses, will seldom fail of arriving at a conclusion satisfactory to his own mind. He will seldom fail of improving his condition in respect of real knowledge, and there can be no more desirable state of feeling than a sincere and disinterested desire to obtain truth, and to free ourselves from whatever prejudices and undue influences obstruct our pursuit of it. We may still, after our best efforts, be abundantly conscious of our liability to err, and may feel the folly of our pretending to that kind of certainty which could be supposed to authorize us to prevent others from pursuing their own course; but we cannot reflect and examine without thinking our opinions worthy of attention, and we may reasonably be so confident of the supreme value of truth, as to be warmly interested in making known whatever appears to us to have that character.

He who is duly conscious of his own fallibility,

and has a proper respect for the opinions of others, whose right to judge, and general capacity of judging well, he cannot think less than his own, though he may suppose them prejudiced or misled on a particular subject, must necessarily be not only incapable of resorting to violence for the support of opinions, but incapable of supposing his own opinions absolutely essential: he may nevertheless be firmly convinced of the truth and value of his opinions, and may feel a lively and earnest zeal to promote them. The distinction is, that he can only wish to promote them by manifesting their truth and their good influences; that he can only desire to make them really acceptable to the minds of others, not to have them submitted to and professed; that he can only value them for the sake of the effects which he considers them as calculated to produce; he can never wish to bring others any more than he can consent to place himself under the trammels of *a creed*.

Men act as if they thought that God must be offended at the errors of his frail creatures, and that they, being entitled to consider themselves as free from error, and as judges in God's behalf, are called upon to vindicate his cause, and to denounce his vengeance against those who will not take *their* guidance to the knowledge of his mind and will. Enlightened Christian zeal is very different



from this : it is the full conviction that the knowledge of the character, perfections and plans of God, the author of our being, our supreme Governor, and the source of all the good we possess or can hope for, is the most important knowledge that human beings can obtain, and that errors on these subjects are principal sources of the conduct, dispositions, and affections which are destructive of human happiness ; that the mission of Jesus Christ was to make known unto us the Father—to declare the truth concerning his nature, his will, and his designs respecting his rational creatures, and to exhibit the beautiful and admirable results of the possession and constant feeling of this truth in discourses and conduct, which afford the most perfect guidance by instruction and example to piety, faith and goodness ; that a right apprehension of our Saviour's instructions and example, by which we can alone derive from them the full benefit they were intended to confer, is to be obtained by examination and discussion of the Christian Scriptures, and that those who have already examined, reflected, and satisfied their own minds, are bound by every feeling of benevolence towards their fellow-creatures, of respect for the divine plans, and of love for what is good and right, to adopt means for making known and recommending what they believe.





## THE MORAL PERFECTIONS OF GOD.

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HOSEA xi. 9.

“ I am God and not man.”

WHEN the prophet Hosea represents the Almighty as addressing these words to the Israelites, the meaning, as we collect it from the context, is, that God is incapable of being affected by human passions, and pursues the course dictated by his own perfections, unmoved by their agitations and inaccessible to their influences.

The sentiment is just, sublime, and practically important. In applying ourselves to the pursuit of that knowledge, which is the most interesting, useful and ennobling of all human attainments—the knowledge of the attributes and character of the great first cause and Governor of all things, the Author of our existence, and the Supreme Disposer of our lot—there is no error into which we are so much in danger of falling as that of attributing our *own feelings, passions* and *weak-*

*nesses* to the exalted object of our contemplations, and judging of his dealings with his creatures as if he were, if not altogether, yet almost *such an one as ourselves*.

This by no means arises from a deficiency of reverence for his greatness, or from a bold presumptuous attempt to bring him down to our level; but from the want of proper attention and reflection in separating whatever partakes of human weakness and imperfection from our conceptions of him, and from the habit too commonly indulged in of *theorizing*, or hastily founding abstract and universal truths on passages of Scripture, which merely express the Divine conduct in particular instances in language *derived from human feelings*, in order that it might be intelligible even to the ignorant and uncultivated among human beings.

In reference to an error which seems to me to be so very common, and against which my present object calls upon me particularly to guard you, I introduce this discourse on the perfections of the Deity, as they respect the topics of religious controversy, with the solemn words which the prophet attributes to God himself, expressing the exaltation and glory of his attributes, and the inconceivable distance which separates him from his frail and weak creatures—" *I am GOD and not MAN.*"

To acquire whatever knowledge by Nature or Revelation we are made capable of acquiring respecting our great Creator and Governor, is certainly not less our duty than it must be our delight; and as upon this knowledge our religious feelings, hopes and expectations must be founded, its general correctness, as far as it goes, must be of the most serious importance to us, so as to demand our most searching and anxious investigation. Yet at the same time there is a degree of reverence due to the subject, which should restrain us from wild and unprofitable speculation, and any just consideration of the weakness of our own nature must lead us to look for a portion of mystery from which all our endeavours to escape must ever be in vain. To understand the Almighty unto perfection is indeed above our powers and beyond our reasonable hopes. But we are well aware that on the general correctness of our notions respecting his attributes, character and dealings with us, must depend our maintaining those feelings towards him which become our situation, and are fitted to have a salutary influence on our conduct; consequently that to hope for some clear and satisfactory information cannot be presumptuous, and to use the best means in our power for ascertaining what is really to be learned, especially from the records of Reve-

lation, is a duty which no one who values religion can consistently disclaim.

In our endeavours to derive from the Scriptures just notions of the divine perfections, we shall find it necessary to attend to the circumstance, that there are passages applicable to the subject of two kinds, in the one of which simple absolute truths are expressed as distinctly as the nature of human language will allow: in the other the relations of God to his creatures, and his conduct to them in particular instances, are explained in such a manner as is adapted to human feelings and the weakness of human reason, and especially to the ideas and sentiments of those (being mostly in a very rude and ignorant state) to whom the books were first addressed. Now with respect to passages of the latter class, it is evident in the first place that all such seemingly general assertions, as are from the circumstances of the case manifestly intended only to express the Divine conduct or purpose in a particular instance, are to be excluded from our account, with all such expressions as are decidedly anthropomorphitical, i.e. representing the conduct or purposes of God as if he were under the influence of human passions or affections, as when it is stated that he *repented* of having done any thing. *Secondly*, that declarations respecting the relations of God to his creatures, the

nature of his moral government, and the manner in which he regards human conduct, are to be understood in consistency with those absolute truths respecting his own character and attributes which admit of no modification or interference, and which must be taken as the fundamental part of our knowledge respecting him.

Thus our notions of the divine attributes and character, will be either *practical*, which is when we consider them in reference to the conduct we ought to pursue, applying for our guidance the promises and threatenings of Scripture, as resulting from his holiness, justice, mercy, and faithfulness—and the various excitements to love, revere, and obey him, as arising from the consideration of his goodness, his majesty, his eternity and unchangeableness, his omniscience and his universal providence—or *philosophical*, which is, when they are viewed in relation to each other, to the glory of his nature, and the theory of religion. That the Scriptures teach us to ascribe certain attributes to the Supreme Being, and apply these in certain circumstances for our practical benefit, is allowed by all parties, and there can be no question but that sincere Christians of all parties derive advantage and comfort from the contemplation of them ; but it has nevertheless become a matter of controversy, how the divine perfections are to be re-

conciled to each other and made to bear upon the doctrines of religion, as affording arguments for, or against, the probability of particular views of the nature of Gospel Salvation; and such controversy cannot but be esteemed of very high and serious importance. In treating of it, we shall find the value of these introductory observations, for it is plain that we here have to do with the divine attributes in their absolute nature, and their relation to each other, not with their practical application to men's ordinary wants, in making which, the language of Scripture is so often accommodated to the conceptions of ignorant men; and by attention to what has been said, we shall, I hope, gain these advantages: *first*, that we shall avoid that great source of error in such inquiries, appropriating to our purpose passages from Scripture, which were written entirely with a view to God's dealings in particular instances, and speak of him, for the sake of being more intelligible, as if he were influenced by human feelings—but were never designed to explain the principles of his government, or to convey abstract truths respecting his character: and, *secondly*, that we shall be able more readily and more correctly to distinguish between those attributes which are essential parts of the divine nature, and may be reasoned upon as such, and those which are ascribed to God in



Scripture only in a relative sense, and must be resolved into, and explained in consistency with the former.

The perfections of God are usually divided into two classes, *natural* and *moral*; not that the latter are, less than the former, an essential part of the Divine nature, or that any real difference can be said to exist between the two classes; but merely as a matter of convenience in our consideration of them. The former including faculties and modes or properties of existence, as *power, wisdom, eternity, omnipresence, immutability, and constant happiness*. The latter, such qualities as are analogous to those which constitute moral character in human beings, as *benevolence, holiness, justice, faithfulness, mercy*. The inquiries in which we are now engaging are concerned exclusively with the moral attributes, and let us first consider how they are usually understood, and what effects are attributed to them.

*Holiness* consists in the approbation of what is good, and the abhorrence of what is wicked, and according to the common notion, as a perfection of God, it implies that there is an essential, eternal, necessary difference between sin and what is good, to recognise which, with approval of the one and abhorrence of the other, constitutes the quality of holiness; so that all who in any degree commit

sin, are necessarily objects of hatred to a holy being, and must be under his wrath, unless by some means relieved from it, and brought within the influence of his mercy. The essential quality of holiness is understood to be perfect hatred of sin as such, and of all who are in any degree guilty of it.

Then, as to *justice*, it is believed, also, to be a *distinct, independent* attribute of Deity, which consists in perceiving what belongs, or is due, to every action, and in appropriating the reward or punishment which each calls for. It is assumed, that the nature of sin is so malignant, that infinite misery belongs, as a punishment, to every sin, and that justice absolutely requires its infliction—so that God would cease to be a holy being if he did not regard all sinners with hatred and abhorrence—he would cease to be a just being if he did not desire to inflict upon them the punishment belonging to their sins. According to this view a disposition to inflict pain on the creatures of his hand is a part of the perfection of the Deity, and constitutes a portion of his glory. God is so bound to punishment, that to remit it would be a stain on his own perfections. He must inflict it, and must be conscious of its displaying his glory. He must even find his happiness in inflicting it, otherwise the possession of the highest excellence



would interfere with perfect and unchangeable felicity. But he possesses likewise the attribute of *benevolence*, which is a constant desire to communicate happiness in every possible way, and one glorious branch of which—*mercy*—consists expressly in a disposition to pardon sin and remit its punishment. How then are we to reconcile these perfections? How is a perfect hatred of sin and a constant necessary disposition to punish it, to be conceived of as co-existing with a constant inclination to pardon it, and remit its penalty? or how can the utmost desire to produce the happiness of all beings be joined with an absolute hatred of every violation of perfect rectitude, and of all who are chargeable with any such transgression, i. e. of *all creatures*?

Perfect wisdom and irresistible power being acknowledged divine attributes, and God himself alone existing necessarily, one is tempted to wonder that sin is not annihilated, and *benevolence*, being always united with the perfections just mentioned, it seems difficult to account for, that it should ever have been allowed to come into existence. It is answered that this could not have been prevented, without taking away man's free agency; but was this quality in any way worth the tremendous sacrifice made for its sake, especially considering that it is believed that after the

first sin only a tainted nature descended to the remainder of the race?

But God provided a remedy for the evil which by means of sin was introduced; he provided for salvation notwithstanding sin, and in perfect consistency with his own holiness and justice, his own Son an equal partaker in his godhead, becoming also truly a man, and suffering, as man, the full penalty of sin, in order that he might buy off from punishment those who, through faith in him, can partake in the merit of his death. Such is the theory, without pretending to settle the important question as to the extent to which the merits of Christ can be applied, a question which we are content to leave to be discussed by those who find no other objection to the system. Neither will I now urge the strange incompatibility of ideas involved in the union of God and man—the inconsistency, that if the human nature only suffered, the suffering was by the supposition of no value; whilst for a really divine being to suffer, is contradictory and absurd; or the entire want of direct Scriptural support for either the union of the two natures, or the Deity of the Son. It will be quite enough, at present, to observe, that God's justice and holiness must render him entirely incapable of accepting the punishment of the innocent instead of the guilty, and would be so far

from being satisfied by such a scheme, that it could only be regarded by him as a pure aggravation of evil. If justice really renders necessary a full payment for sin in punishment, then it is from the sinner, and him only, that it requires, and can accept, this payment. It is not conceivable that the suffering of another can have any relation to my sin. This notion of vicarious suffering originates in the rudest ideas of the most uncultivated men in the most barbarous times. In the degree in which it has been occasionally practised by human beings, it is felt to be degrading to their rational nature, and offensive alike to justice and humanity. Yet such conduct we are to attribute as a perfection to the great supreme, and to contemplate as a means of elevating our conceptions of his holiness. But there is another theoretical defect in the system which requires our notice. It is affirmed, that God's holiness consists in an invariable approbation of what is good, and hatred of sin and evil. It is thus supposed, that good and evil are qualities independent of the Divine will or appointment, having in themselves a natural inherent claim to approbation and condemnation, which is perceived and acknowledged by all minds possessing holiness; so that being good or evil, and being holy or the contrary, are relative qualities; but where, we may be allowed to ask,

is the solid foundation for all this theory? It is far more natural to understand the words good and right, evil and wrong, as describing, not the abstract nature of the action, but its effects on some being or beings. It is only by their effects that *virtue* and *vice* can possibly be known to us. By virtue we understand that which, according to the actual constitution of the human mind and of external things, is alone capable of constituting the real preponderating and ultimate happiness of a human being. It is that which is really adapted to our nature, and which the general course of the providence of God in this world, as well as his purposes in another, favours and sanctions. Vice, on the contrary, consists of whatever is really unsuited to bestow happiness on such beings as we are, and though exhibiting an outward show of pleasure, is really upon the whole and ultimately a cause of misery to those who indulge in it. Such a definition of virtue and vice is at least intelligible. None but the most inconsiderate or dishonest could so pervert it as to represent it as authorising us to do whatever we please, and to make our own inclinations or interests our rule of right. It is, on the contrary, distinctly laid down that our Maker has given to our race a bodily and mental constitution, differing indeed in minute particulars in different individuals, but in its lead-

ing features common to us all ; according to which constitution there is but one kind of actions, dispositions and affections capable of conferring real happiness, the highest happiness of which our nature is capable, and this kind is what we call virtuous ; all others, though they may deceive us with the appearance of good, are really pernicious. The right or virtuous course is then a *reality*, which may or may not be found out, according as we have or have not employed judicious means, or received sufficient assistance ; but it always exists, and our greatest good always consists in knowing and adhering to it. This view of virtue does not indeed make its existence and qualities independent of God himself, and does not make our approbation of it altogether distinct from its consequences ; but these in fact are dreams of theoretical moralists, who have fancied they were serving the interests of virtue by representing good and evil as essential, independent distinctions of actions, which every morally-constituted mind necessarily perceives. The principles of morality are as unchangeable as the nature of man, for they depend upon that nature. To represent them as beyond the control of the infinitely benevolent and wise Deity is by no means to add to their force, or to make them more deserving of our reverence, and practically does in fact render

them unintelligible, and therefore unconvincing. We see another reason against admitting the eternal necessary distinction of good and evil, as required to be believed by the reputedly orthodox system, if we consider that virtue and vice cannot even be conceived of, except in connection with the actions and dispositions of created beings, and consequently their eternal existence is manifestly absurd. The many instances also in which the same actions are more or less virtuous or vicious, according to the force of the inducements or temptations, and the state of mind from which they spring, might serve sufficiently to expose the mistake of imagining such strong and decided lines to separate good from evil, and the distinctions between them to be so fixed in the nature of things as is often represented.

The notion of justice above proposed, and which I apprehend to be absolutely essential to the whole scheme of salvation, according to the popular theology, namely, that it consists in perceiving reward and punishment to be due to certain actions or courses of conduct, and in being disposed to bestow them accordingly, is liable to most serious objections, which one would think could hardly fail to strike a reflecting mind.

In the first place, it does not at all appear *why* or *how* the reward and punishment become due ;



there is still an idea of *merit* implied as being in some way antecedently acquired, and yet when we search into the matter we can find no foundation on which it can be made to rest. The disposition called justice supposes the *merit* or *demerit*. If this consist in the tendency of actions to produce good or evil effects, happiness or misery to the agent or those affected by them, then justice resolves itself in a form of benevolence; if the merit be something essentially different from this, we require to know what it is, and we have already seen that no satisfactory answer can be given. We have words but no ideas connected with them. Again, justice, as commonly understood, consists in a disposition to pay a share of good or evil, to which previous actions have *entitled* some agent, and it is maintained that such is the nature of sin, that it makes everlasting misery due to every one who commits it. Some have attempted to explain this, by saying that sin being an offence against an infinite being, must be an infinite evil, and requires infinite punishment; but we must remember that the very theory assumed is, that sin is an evil in itself, not as a violation of God's command, and that it belongs to God's holiness to perceive and feel this evil; but the evil would exist even if he did not perceive it, consequently the evil (according to this theory) does not consist

in an offence against him—and if it did, there is no possible connection between the perfection of the being offended and the nature of the creature committing the offence, that should make the offence partake of infinity. On the contrary, the contrast between the weakness, frailty, and transitoriness of the creature, and the absolute perfection and eternal duration of the judge, strikes us most forcibly as a reason for a greater degree of leniency than could otherwise have been thought of. The idea of such a creature as man having it in his power to deserve either infinite punishment or permanent reward is totally inadmissible; we cannot bring ourselves to conceive of any such relation between the acts of our transient lives, and future unmeasurable duration. God, in his great goodness, may intend us for permanent bliss, in his wisdom and kindness he may chasten us in preparation for it; but if he design for us eternal misery, the principle according to which this necessarily belongs to us never has been, or can be, explained so as to be felt to be just by human minds.

It is generally felt and acknowledged, that our very best services, and the best that we can even conceive human beings to offer, could do nothing towards entitling us to heavenly rewards—that what we are encouraged to hope for, we owe en-



tirely to the free mercy of our Heavenly Father—and it ought to be quite as evident that the sins of frail mortals cannot deserve or render proper eternal punishment: there can be no natural fitness or reasonableness found in such an allotment. If the doctrine be true, it must be admitted as the appointment, which it would be folly in us to arraign, of one who has all power in his hands, and does according to his will in heaven and on earth; but we may reasonably require very strong evidence of its truth, and this evidence I must altogether deny to have any existence.

I observe again, that if punishment and reward are not administered with a view to their results, and consequently do not resolve themselves into an application of benevolence, they are not capable of being in any way accounted for; but punishment assumes very much the aspect of revenge—reward, of partiality and favouritism. Among human beings we refuse to recognize as consistent with justice, any act which has not a direct tendency to produce good. The payment of crime with suffering, which has no effect in improving the sufferer, or protecting society, we regard with just abhorrence, and we require penalties not merely to be proved to be useful, but to be proved to effect their good purposes at the least possible expense of suffering inflicted—and are we not

ashamed to cherish these just and humane views in reference to the conduct of our fellow-creatures, if we never think of applying them in justification of the character and government of our supreme ruler? Can we any longer dare to attribute to God as a perfection—to that God whose benevolence all nature proclaims, and who is revealed to us in Scripture as a God of love—our Heavenly Father, who is through Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto men,—a quality which has at first been conceived by ignorant men in barbarous times, and which, in judging of our fellow men, we have learned to regard with just condemnation and abhorrence? Such is the charge which we find ourselves compelled to bring against the system called orthodox. It interprets the perfections of God according to low and unworthy notions, which might be excusable in ignorant times, and might naturally, perhaps, occur in the first attempt at bringing such high subjects within the measure of human thought, but which can no longer be expected to satisfy, when we have learned to apply purer and higher principles even to the estimate of human conduct.

The man who, in judging the actions of a fellow-creature, feels himself bound to make allowances for the weakness of his nature, and the force

of the temptation to which he was exposed, cannot well suppose the benevolent Creator, who knoweth our frame, to require from his creatures unblemished excellence, and to be prepared to punish them severely for every deficiency. He who can only justify his own punishment of those who may in any degree be under his control, by the good effects it is reasonably to be expected to produce, who would think it cruelty to inflict any useless suffering, and would regard with abhorrence the idea of exacting a payment for crime, will not readily believe that God is bound to attach endless misery as the penalty of every fault—that it can be consistent with his nature, or that he can possibly be under any obligation to inflict suffering, without any reference to good which it is calculated to effect.

In the common notion of the conduct of God in the Scheme of Human Salvation, there is a perpetual clashing and interfering of opposing attributes. His holiness causes him to hate sin, and to look on all who have been guilty of it with abhorrence; his justice disposes him to the punishment of sin, and will not suffer him to be content without the full amount of punishment due to every offence: his goodness inclines him to regard with kindness all the creatures he has made, and his mercy especially disposes him to overlook their

faults, and to compassionate their weakness and errors. He is represented as obliged, by justice, to require the full amount of punishment, even though it should be inflicted on the innocent, instead of the guilty—and as yielding to mercy only so far, as to pardon those for whose sins the penalty was endured. I must confess my inability to see in such conduct the beauty and excellence either of justice or mercy. It would seem to me more accordant with justice, if the guilty themselves, not their substitutes, were punished—it would better conform to my notion of mercy, if there were a real remission of a penalty, not a mere transference of it, to another party.

When we endeavour to understand the Divine Nature, whether from reason or scripture, we are irresistibly led to the conclusion, that all the moral attributes centre in goodness, and are to be explained but as manifestations of it. There is no other perfection which the voice of Nature so certainly proclaims; there is no other which Revelation with equal clearness affirms. We only exalt our conceptions of holiness and justice, by understanding them to be in full and perfect accordance with benevolence, whilst we cannot suppose them to require or to imply anything inconsistent with it, without destroying the harmony of the Divine character and counsels.

We are assured that "God is love," that "he is good unto all, and that his tender mercies are over all his works;" that "he is our heavenly father," that "he is slow to anger, and plenteous in compassion." That his own free and unsolicited goodness originated the scheme of Salvation, and that he is, through Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their transgressions unto men.

If we will only understand holiness and justice in such a sense as we should think honourable to a human being, and will cease to attribute to God as a perfection, a quality which we should abhor and condemn in a fellow man, we shall find no difficulty in harmonising together the Divine perfections—and the view we shall obtain of God's government, and of his conduct towards his creatures, will be such as, if not to conform with the decisions of creeds, to be agreeable to our reason and best feelings, calculated for the promotion of virtue, and such as to render religion really venerable and lovely.

All the moral attributes of Deity resolve themselves into goodness. Holiness is but the contemplation of moral qualities with approbation, as the sources of happiness to rational creatures; justice is only the application of benevolence in the administration of rewards and punishments, in such

a manner as ultimately to produce the greatest possible good to all moral agents, whilst mercy is the remission of penalties, where a suitable and real change in the mind of the offender makes them no longer necessary for that benevolent purpose, for which alone they are proposed or inflicted.

This, my friends, is a great subject of religious inquiry, upon which it seems to me that the sentiments of Unitarian Christians possess so decided a superiority, that few can refuse to wish them true, even if they have not the satisfaction of perceiving that they are so. Our views of the perfections of God are simple, harmonious, and beautiful. They are sanctioned by all the appearances of nature. They alone give due weight to those declarations of Scripture, upon which the sacred writers themselves have dwelt the most strongly, and remove all inconsistency and confusion from the subject. They alone are calculated to produce the "perfect love which casteth out fear," and whilst they take away the causes for uneasy or degrading fear, blend ardent love with filial reverence, and unchanging trust with devout submission. They represent the Divine Nature, such that it is indeed bliss to know it, and open an exhaustless store of whatever is lovely, interesting, or ennobling, to the contemplative and pious mind,

# THE PRACTICAL TENDENCY OF UNITARIAN CHRISTIANITY.

## PART I.—PRINCIPLES BY WHICH WE JUDGE.

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### EPHESIANS ii. 10.

“ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained, that we should walk in them.”

CHRISTIANS are described as being the *workmanship* of God, because he has separated them from the rest of the world, and bestowed upon them their peculiar privileges and advantages. He did this by the agency of Jesus Christ, the messenger of his grace to mankind, *in* or *through* whom, therefore, they are said to have been *spiritually created*—formed by the precepts and promises he communicated, and a suitable change effected in their hearts and minds. The end of this new creation the apostle plainly declares ; it was to produce in them good works, *in which God designed that they should walk*, or for walking in which he had, by the instructions of the Gospel, fitted them.



If this account of the nature and purpose of our divine religion, which seems to me to find some confirmation in every part of the New Testament, be the true one, and the moral and practical influences of Christianity be indeed its most important, its essential part,—then it would seem to follow, that we may obtain a pretty strong presumptive argument in favour of, or against, the truth of any particular doctrinal views of our religion, from a fair examination of their tendency.

It is indeed difficult to imagine any one contending in favour of opinions which he does not believe to produce a beneficial effect; and we can no more pretend to be absolutely sure respecting the influences, than we can respecting the truth, of doctrines. It must be confessed, too, that great caution is needed in our attempts to apply such an argument, lest we should be led into injustice towards our brethren: but, after all, making every reasonable deduction, we must decide that *it is* possible to form a judgment, on reasonable and substantial grounds, of the practical tendency of particular opinions, and that it is important both to apply the test to those which we view in an unfavourable light, and to defend our own views from imputations against them, which are commonly repeated. I intend, then, in the following discourse, to examine what are the real influences

of Unitarian Christianity, and to bring it into contrast in this respect, both with reputed orthodoxy and with mere natural religion. I have no doubt but that the defenders of each of these systems consider their own as equally pre-eminent for the good it produces and the happiness it bestows, as for the strength of the arguments by which it is supported; and if their feeling were everything, it would be vain to argue on the subject: but I have said that I think we may find solid ground on which to rest our judgment, and I will, in the first place, explain myself somewhat on this point. I suppose that there will not be a very wide difference amongst us as to what constitute good and desirable influences, and if sometimes we are found not to agree, there are common principles to which we can appeal. In such an inquiry we cannot, of course, assume the truth and importance of a particular system of faith, we can only argue from the fitness of certain principles to produce individual and social happiness or misery, a fitness which may either be perceived in their own nature, or inferred from the conduct of those who have professed them. It may be perceived from their own nature—for the inquiry is simply whether what is required in the name and by the authority of religion, is what reason and experience prove to contribute to the happiness of life. We know very

well what sort of dispositions and affections, and what sort of a condition—setting aside those circumstances over which our own conduct can produce no influence, and which, by the ordinance of an inscrutable Providence, are appointed for us all—constitute, or chiefly contribute to, happiness. We may be told, in certain cases, that conduct which causes us great unhappiness here, will be hereafter so rewarded that we shall have reason greatly to rejoice in having adopted it. This may be true and important, but it is a question of faith, and can influence us only when we already believe in the truth of the religion; it ought not, therefore, to be referred to in an inquiry into one kind of evidence of the religion being true. If I am required to sacrifice all my interests, feelings, and enjoyments in this world, for the sake of heavenly happiness, then, of course, I cannot recommend my religion as contributing to happiness; which is to argue that it is *probably true*, because it promotes happiness, whereas, in fact, it requires the sacrifice of happiness here, because we are convinced of its truth, and believe in its promises hereafter. Whether with respect to our religion altogether, or to any particular view of it, we may lay it down as certain, that in so far as it only affords us *promises* of future bliss—these may be *reasons for considering* its evidences, but cannot

possibly afford even any presumption of its truth ; but when its direct effect is ascertained to be to make us happy, this is a reason for believing it to be the appointment of a wise and benevolent Deity—even this cannot be considered as in itself alone affording any *proof* of the authority of a system, but it is a very favourable character of a religion which claims authority, affording a presumptive argument for its truth well worthy of attention ; and in deciding between different representations of the nature of what both parties receive as true and authoritative, this kind of argument may be employed with greatly increased force.

It is a much more delicate matter to argue from the conduct of the professors of any particular opinions. It is undoubtedly a reasonable thing in itself. “ By their fruits ye shall know them.” “ Men do not gather grapes off brambles, or figs off thistles.” There can be no truth more certain than that all opinions exercise an influence, good or bad, upon the conduct ; that a man cannot really embrace and apply wrong opinions without being the worse for it, or those which are true and good without enjoying their beneficial influences. But then we must recollect how often prejudice converts what is good into evil, and distorts as it were the actions of those whom it regards with dislike ; how often conduct is judged

of, not by its real merits, but by its conformity to the false standard of popular opinion, so that the errors we receive are the cause of our condemning what ought to enable us to detect them. We must also consider how very much the real moral character of actions depends on the motives with which they are performed, which it is not always possible for us to know, and which are so often hastily and uncandidly imagined. Again, although it be certain that opinions exercise a real influence on conduct and feelings, it is necessary to take into account that all who profess the same doctrines are not under precisely the same influences; the views they entertain upon other subjects, and the effects of education, natural temper and social intercourse variously modifying, sometimes in the way of improvement, and sometimes of deterioration, the direct influence of the particular doctrines.

From these considerations it is evident that although we may very fairly argue that a certain doctrine must naturally produce a certain effect, we cannot argue that because a certain individual receives that doctrine, he must conspicuously exhibit the effect; and on the other hand, neither the excellencies nor the faults of individuals can be employed as proofs of the tendency of opinions they are known to hold, because it is not in our

power to decide how much is due to the opinions in question, and how much to others which he equally maintains, or to indirect mental or social influences which may be in opposition to the effect of some doctrine which he has been led to adopt and profess.

It is only in respect to large bodies, through long periods of time, that we can be quite safe in our conclusions respecting the effects of opinions. Here we are freed from disturbing circumstances which confuse our judgment, and can observe the average effect of particular systems of belief upon human beings in every variety of age, condition in life, education and temperament; and we shall find that this mode of judging, by taking a wide field in space and time to collect and equalize our results, is the only safe one, not only in such an inquiry as that now proposed, but in all those sciences which are concerned with human conduct. I cannot infer a general law respecting commercial intercourse, respecting an educational plan, or respecting the efficacy of means for preventing any public evil from the behaviour of an individual in given circumstances, because I do not know *all* the influences which are acting upon them; yet I know that *there are* general laws on such subjects, founded in human nature, and uniform in their operation as ten-



dencies to action, and I am sure that by examination of a sufficient variety of instances I shall be able to separate the universal principle from what belongs to the individual mind and position, and to establish it as the result of experience.

The case is very much the same, and for a similar reason, in what relates to the physical constitution of our frame. General rules of great value respecting the tendency as to health and long life, of certain habits and modes of living, may be derived from sufficiently extensive observation; but though they certainly prove the kind of influence of the habit in question, they do not enable us to predict results in particular cases, because these depend on the constitution of the individual, and on the other habits which he may unite with the one under consideration. This kind of reflection will check the arrogance of personal censure, and dispose us to candour and caution in our judgments, but it will unfold to us the study of human nature as a means of determining how we are to live well and happily, and what sort of doctrines have most claim to be adopted as the guides of our conduct. It will teach us how to form a just judgment, and guard us against popular delusions and fashionable follies, of which there certainly are not fewer in relation to religion than to most other subjects.



I am too sensible of the difficulties of this kind of reasoning, and of the bias of mind to which, with the best intentions, one must be exposed, to offer it as in itself sufficient to satisfy a serious searcher after truth. I defend my opinions by appealing to the direct testimony of the only competent authorities, and by showing the insufficiency and worthlessness of the evidence produced on the other side, the inconsistency and unreasonableness of the system of doctrine which is opposed to me; but we must view the subject in every possible light: endeavouring to contrast the fair and genuine effects of opposite doctrines seems to be a useful exercise of mind; it at least fixes our attention on the best results of the doctrines which we have conscientiously embraced; the more we study, understand, and reflect on which, the better. It increases our interest in our religious sentiments by making us feel their peculiar value, and it gives us the opportunity of weighing the observations of those who think differently, and of repelling accusations which we believe to be unjust, arising either from misunderstanding our principles, or from an unhappy disposition to misrepresent us.

Nothing, my brethren, but my firm and solemn conviction that the doctrines I uphold are not merely favourable to virtue and religion, but have

decidedly the advantage over all other varieties of speculative faith in their tendency to produce piety, holiness and charity, to secure our peace of mind here, and to prepare us for eternal felicity; and moreover, that various popular forms of religious faith exercise a highly unfavourable influence on the character—could overcome my reluctance to controversial discussions, which, could they be fairly viewed as unconnected with their practical effects, would, in my estimation, compared with the weightier matters of the law, be “trifles light as air.” I found my zeal for truth on the belief that it never can be useless. It may indeed often be the case, in respect of injurious doctrines, founded on the misunderstanding of certain passages of Scripture, and strenuously maintained as being Scriptural by those who have been brought up in religious habits, and who seriously and frequently study the word of God, that the mischief of the speculative doctrines may be to a considerable degree counteracted by the effect of the Gospel precepts, so as for them to exert only a secondary influence on the character, which though unfavourable is much limited in extent and importance, but some influence must always necessarily be produced. The worthiest and the best, in whatever degree they are in error, must be made better and hap-

pier by being freed from it ; and if we strongly believe them to be in error, it is as necessary a duty of Christian charity that we should endeavour to convince them of it, as that we should in any other way labour to diminish the evils and improve the condition of our fellow creatures.

I have now explained and justified the principles, of which I propose in another discourse to attempt some applications. But applications will continually occur to the minds of those who are satisfied of the goodness of the principles, naturally leading them to value and earnestly contend for the truth, without being tempted to illiberal and unkind censures of those who seem to them only partially to have obtained it.



# THE PRACTICAL TENDENCY OF UNITARIAN CHRISTIANITY.

## PART II.—DOCTRINES AND THEIR EFFECTS.

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EPHESIANS ii. 10.

“ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained, that we should walk in them.”

I HAVE undertaken in this discourse, to endeavour to contrast the influences of Unitarian Christianity with those both of reputed orthodoxy and of unassisted natural religion. To this end it seems requisite that I should first express my own feeling of the peculiar value of Unitarian sentiments, at the same time attempting to show the falsity of some of the imputations against them, and I shall then conclude by referring more directly to some of the points in which other opinions seem to me objectionable or deficient. The subject is so extensive that I can only select for present notice a few of the particulars which seem to me most important; and first, respecting the attributes, character and dealings with us, of the Supreme Being. The Unitarian Christian believes *goodness* to be the great moral perfection of

the Divine nature, of which he understands *justice* as well as mercy to be but a modification, and he takes the notion of infinite and perfect benevolence to be that in consistency with which all God's dealings are to be explained.

He consequently believes that all things were originally created, and are constantly directed by an overruling Providence for good, and that the suppositions of God's original plan for the happiness of mankind having failed, and of his being compelled by the perfection of his nature to hate, and to pursue with unrelenting vengeance, to eternal perdition, a large proportion of his creatures, which appear to be assumed by most Christians, are absurd and impossible. Now, if to love "the Lord our God with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the mind, and all the strength," be indeed the first and great commandment, we surely need hardly ask which is most strongly led to the cultivation of this affection, the Unitarian or the believer in the reputedly orthodox doctrines respecting the consequences of Adam's fall, original sin, hereditary depravity, and eternal damnation. The Scriptures of the New Testament represent God to us as our heavenly Father, and encourage us to cherish towards him, in a purer and more exalted degree, the warmth of affection, reverential awe, and filial

confidence, which become children towards the best and kindest of earthly parents. To those who hold Unitarian views of the divine attributes and government, such sentiments are natural and suitable. But does not the stern character of the judge harmonize much better with the prevailing ideas of God's perfections and dealings? Is it not an abuse of the term—a bitter libel on those earthly parents, who have taught us to love and revere the name—to address by the endearing appellation of *Father*, a being who has made *eternal misery* the punishment to his frail creatures, of errors to which he himself made them liable, and would grant the pardon, even of a small number of them, on no other terms than a full price paid in the sufferings of the innocent?

Some may be apt to think that I am here giving an unjustly harsh representation of the popular doctrine, and it may be true that its defenders do not *now* give it so repulsive an appearance; but does the real meaning of what they say materially differ from this? and is not the whole of my statement fully borne out by authors of repute and authority amongst themselves—nay, would it not be easy to bring forward, from approved and popular authors, language even more revolting to every rightly feeling mind? My purpose is to exhibit the doctrine in its consistent and naked



deformity, not as dressed up to avoid giving offence to a prying and examining age, in language which, after all, either really expresses the same meaning, or has no meaning. The real intent of the doctrine called orthodox, seems to be to describe God as being prevented by his holiness from pardoning sin without some one suffering for it, although he himself formed us with a natural liability to sin. It represents eternal misery as the proper and necessary consequence of sin, only to be bought off by the infinite sufferings of another being, and it supposes God to hold in abhorrence a large proportion of his creatures, and to extend mercy, not as a gift (which is the only proper meaning of the term), but as a purchase. Where, then, is his paternal character? What do the believers in such doctrines mean by calling him their "Father in heaven?"

The Unitarian Christian believing the Providence of God to be universal, and all his dealings, in their real and ultimate results, benevolent and kind, recognizes with delight, in everything around him, fresh proofs of Divine beneficence, and finds constantly new incitements to venerate and love the author of all good, his Father and benefactor. Whether he contemplates the ever-beauteous face of nature, or, sympathizing in the happiness which reigns amongst inferior creatures, gives to their silent

gratitude the voice of thanksgiving, and the tongue of praise—or whether he traces in the pages of history the operations of supreme wisdom and goodness, in drawing good from apparent evil, and working their own purposes by means even of the vices and intemperate passions of men, whilst, amidst all apparent checks, the grand progress intellectual, moral, and social, of the human race, steadily advances—or whether, investigating the state of the world around him, he delights to observe, amidst so much evil and suffering, the predominance of happiness in almost every condition, and of good in almost every character—finds in each different view fresh cause to rejoice in his Creator's love, and to trust in his power and wisdom. Filial confidence and filial affection so naturally result from his principles, that if he fail in them, it must be because his heart has no share in his professions—because he has made his religion but a matter of empty speculation, and has wholly, or in a great degree, neglected to apply it to the purpose for which it was intended, and for the sake of which it is chiefly valuable.

If piety really consist in referring all things to God, and submitting to all his appointments with resignation—if its best signs are humble and cheerful gratitude in prosperity, accompanied by unfeigned desires and active endeavours to make

others partake in the happiness we enjoy, and in disappointment, affliction and suffering, patience, submission, trust in Divine goodness, and serious efforts to derive from our sorrows the lessons they were sent to teach us, then true piety naturally results from Unitarian principles respecting God, his character and his providence, and these principles are capable of answering the great practical ends of all religion. But I can by no means admit that the commonly-received doctrines afford equally just grounds for love, confidence and habitual piety, and what *is* produced seems to me to be due more to the influence of the study of the Scriptures than to the operation of the creed ; for there is in the God of Orthodoxy such a strict and unrelenting severity towards the creatures of his hand, whose frail nature was given them by him, that he is much more naturally an object of fear than of love. “The perfect love which casteth out fear” certainly will not be felt towards him. The awful sternness of his character checks our confidence, and effectually prevents that cheerful trust which is founded in the belief that “God is love.” The character of piety is changed by it, and it appears in austerity of countenance and manner, and in a multitude of prayers full of self-abasement, instead of in a cheerful though moderate and cautious enjoyment of the good things of this life, equally

considering its blessings and its afflictions as the appointments of Divine love, and exerting ourselves to use both in the manner he has intended, so that this changing scene of mingled joy and sorrow may prepare us for the more pure and elevated felicity of the state to which it is introductory. Unitarians are often accused by their fellow Christians of great deficiency in practical piety, and this supposed deficiency is often confidently employed as an argument against their religious system. We have seen, nevertheless, that the system does contain the elements of such piety as consists in love, submission and veneration; such piety as warms, purifies, elevates and consoles; of such as tends to cheerful obedience and rational faith. If, however, a definition be given of piety, adapted to an opposite creed, and giving prominent importance to elements which we expressly disclaim, or consider as of secondary value, and required in limited proportion, it is then easy to convict us of deficiency and to load us with censure. If I mention one or two sources of reproach, you will readily judge of their argumentative importance.

Many charges against us arise from our not believing pleasure to be in itself sinful, but supposing that when innocent, and not interfering with the performance of any specific duty, it may

be sought in moderation as a refreshment amidst the labours of life; whilst, on the contrary, persons of other persuasions, who make much pretension to religion, usually condemn all participation in the pleasures of the world as in itself sinful, and are in the habit of regarding their most moderate use as a sign of irreligion. We of course defend our practice as consistent with true piety, and refuse to be judged by a standard which others may choose to set up. I need not discuss the question; the candid and judicious will readily see which creed is most reasonable, useful, and productive of happiness. We are also exposed to much reproach, because we are most of us not strict Sabbatarians; that is, though we may think a seventh-day rest from the labours of life most desirable and important, probably of early divine institution, and may be disposed to employ a reasonable portion of the first day of the week in public worship and religious improvement, we do not think the Jewish Sabbath-law obligatory on Christians, and do not admit that the austere observance of the Sabbath is either a duty, useful, or even free from great evil and danger. Calvin was a strong Anti-Sabbatarian, and the practice of the Scotch presbyterians and English puritans is rejected by most Protestants as well as by the Catholic church. It is therefore most unjust to

make our adopting the practice which we in common with so many others think right and favourable to the best influences of religion, the foundation of a charge of irreligion.

There is no doubt that Unitarians attach less importance than most other sects to the frequent repetition of the ceremonies and outward services of religion, which they regard as means of keeping alive good feelings, and strengthening the influence of right principles and motives, but which they can conceive of being carried to an excess, which shall defeat their purpose, and will not pretend to place on a level with the actual duties of piety, holiness, and charity. Here again the condemnation to which they are exposed arises from trying them by a false standard, and calling it impiety to form a different judgment from our accusers respecting the best means of improvement.

I might mention some other things which I have occasionally heard made the subject of charges against us, but these will be sufficient to show how and why we are assailed, and to give every one the means of estimating the justice of the attacks upon us. If our prevailing conduct be only tried by the general principles of the love and obedience of God—justice and charity towards our fellow men—patience, temperance and self-government in our personal character—we can



have no just ground for complaint, and must accept the reputation which we shall appear to deserve; but let not an unfair importance be attached to an arbitrary judgment against us, the result of comparison with a standard which we disclaim. If the necessary limits of my time, and the importance of some topics yet lying before me, did not warn me from entering on so copious a subject, I might enlarge much on the immediate practical value of the Unitarian doctrine respecting our Saviour's person, a value which consists, not only in the simplicity it gives to our worship, but in the additional power it gives to his example, and in the peculiar importance it attributes to his resurrection, as the proof as well as the pledge and assurance of our own. But I hasten to another point which I could not pass over, the direct relation of the Unitarian doctrine to the principles of moral obligation, and the means of producing the truest and highest excellence of moral character. The common views of Christianity making a mistaken and dangerous use of Scriptural language, which a moderate share of attention and critical judgment would show to have a very different meaning, encourage too much the notion of the possibility of sudden repentance, especially at the close of life, and represent the possession, at whatever time ac-



quired, of a peculiar faith in the efficacy of what our Lord has accomplished, as a principal element in the saving power of our religion. Unitarianism alone represents the benefits conferred by the Gospel, as really consisting in the influence on our minds, of its holy precepts and pure principles — represents that virtue constitutes the happiness of human nature, and that pure religion shows in what it consists and how it is to be cultivated and guarded. It teaches us that we can never do wrong without lessening our happiness by it; that indulgence in evil and delay of repentance are fatal mistakes, indicating the want of all real conviction respecting the claims of duty. It shows us the folly of partial obedience; the absolute necessity of constant efforts after improvement. I must feel convinced that the doctrines of hereditary depravity, and of the operation of the devil serving to account for all evil tendencies in our minds, and those of the efficacy of sudden repentance, and a peculiar faith giving us the hope of escaping in time from the evil, even if it be allowed a temporary triumph, are principal causes of Christianity producing less effect on professed believers than we might justly expect; and on the other hand, that the moral principles which Unitarianism peculiarly enforces are of the utmost importance, and have the most immediate

and powerful influence in strengthening us against temptation, and animating us to progressive virtue, such as becomes our high and holy calling.

I shall now very shortly sum up my grounds of objection against the practical influences both of the doctrines called orthodox, and of that unbelief or scepticism which reduce us to mere natural religion. Of course you will understand from what I have said, that I do not pretend to maintain that these evils are equally and necessarily manifested in all individuals who hold such opinions; allowance must be made for differences of natural disposition and temperament, education and acquired habits, and social influences; but I attribute this as being the *real tendency* of the doctrines held, and I maintain that in fact when we review the state of society around us, we can plainly see that it is their result.

I need not here enlarge on the effect of belief in a Trinity, in confusing our minds respecting the proper object of Divine worship, and by ascribing different dispositions towards us, and relations to us, to the different persons, producing one of the serious evils of idolatrous worship; clothing religion in mystery, which makes it confounding to reason, and is therefore opposed to its acquiring that intellectual character which is the source of so much of its useful power, and causing

an unexamining submission to a creed to be accounted meritorious as a security against heresy, by which means the boldest, most acute, and energetic minds are driven towards unbelief, and others are sunk into lethargy on those subjects which ought to be esteemed most interesting. I cannot doubt the tendency of the doctrine of atonement and salvation from Divine wrath by faith in the merits of Christ, to make the love of the Saviour an antagonist principle to the love of God, to draw off our attention from the improvement of our own character as the means of securing God's merciful favour, and to elevate in popular estimation implicit faith, which is really a vice, above the most important virtues. There is even great danger, that when hereditary and inherent depravity of nature accounts for our vicious propensities, and salvation is thought to come to us independently of them, the necessity of exertion for their cure may be undervalued, and the very doctrines of religion made the pretence and excuse for indulgence in what is evil and corrupt. According to different modes of viewing the popular doctrines, and the prominence given to different parts of them, they naturally produce either a too great reliance on external ceremonies, and on the formal part of religion, accompanied by self-indulgence, and a worldly spirit, or an austere and

gloomy asceticism, which would rob human society of all its charms and graces, condemn and proscribe rational pursuits and innocent pleasures, and make religion, instead of being, as it should be, the regulator of our feelings and actions in the business and intercourse of life, become itself our chief object and employment. I will only add now, that the belief in the eternal torments of all who are not saved by Divine grace, through a peculiar faith, obliges us to regard misery as contributing to the glory of God, and to triumph in it as a righteous and holy dispensation; and leads us to look upon our fellow-creatures as condemned and doomed criminals, satisfying ourselves as best we can with the prospect of our own selfish happiness. I have already alluded to the extreme dangers of the popular doctrine concerning repentance.

Natural religion may vary from the rudest and simplest notions of the existence of a superior power, or the most degrading and corrupting idolatry to the purest form of theism, in which the perfections and government of God are fully recognized, and even the future existence of man, in a retributory state, is believed and applied. It is a great question how far the last-mentioned form could ever possibly have existed, had it not borrowed from a system professing to be revealed;

but it is clear that, in its most perfect state, the best that can be said for it is, that it contains all that is excellent in the best form of revealed religion, without the difficulties and objections to which the idea of revelation and of miracle, its necessary proof, is thought to be exposed. *We*, perhaps, deny that these difficulties and objections are at all so great as they are represented. *We*, perhaps, think that the scheme of Divine revelation, as exhibited by its rational defenders, is, upon the whole, of all others the most probable in itself, and accompanied by the fewest sources of doubt and dissatisfaction; but let us, at present, rather consider how far the very best form of natural religion does, in its influences and tendencies, equal that form of Christianity which we maintain to be derived from a fair view of the records of our religion, and to be at once rational and delightful in theory, and useful in practice. In the first place, natural religion leaves us without any knowledge of any declared relation between us and our Maker. He has not made himself known as our ruler, our judge, our father—he has not commanded our obedience, or promised to reward it. He has not declared his perfections, or pointed out to us his will as the means of our happiness. He has not invited us to his worship, or given us any reason to hope that our services

are approved. Our religious offerings are made with uncertainty as to their suitableness, and we are tempted to withhold them, as what God cannot be the better for, and has not asked for; there is altogether a want of any definite claim upon our services, or feeling of obligation connected with them; and I mean this, not only with respect to worship and prayer, but in all our moral duties, which seems to me exceedingly unsuited to human nature, and calculated very much to lower the actual influence of religion on the mind and conduct.

Secondly. It appears to me, that mere natural religion leaves us in uncertainty on several of the most important points, as to what we ought to believe or do. Experience plainly proves that, as a general rule, it cannot bestow that firm faith in a life to come, which is the proper fruit of revealed religion—and, as a natural consequence, it cannot justify the self-denying charity, and strict government, of the passions, which belong to the best influences of a divine system. It cannot be supposed to exert such power in temptation, or to afford such consolations in seasons of sorrow and suffering, as the religion which sets before us the solemn commands and gracious promises of our Maker.

Altogether there is, in natural religion, a want of sufficient *authority*, to be useful to frail mortals in this world of trial. When free from great



errors, and in that form which we believe that it never could have attained without the use of revelation, and which we can evidently trace to the effect of Christianity, it contains much that is good and beautiful, and may exert much valuable influence, but it does not bring us into that happy relationship to the God of Nature and Providence as *our* God and father, who has taught us how our nature and condition may be made to yield the greatest sum of true felicity, has assured us that this is a state of education and preparation, and that even by means of our trials here, we shall be made more happy hereafter—and has appointed means suitable to our nature and wants, for cherishing and promoting the best influences, resisting temptation, and living in faith, piety, and filial obedience.

I have thus endeavoured to bring into fair comparison the moral and religious influences of Unitarian Christianity, and of the systems opposed to it. The just inference appears to me to be a powerful argument in favour of the views which I believe to be supported by every other legitimate mode of reasoning, calculated to strengthen our convictions, to show us the necessity of studying their application, to impress upon us the importance of the faith we embrace, and to rouse our benevolent interest in diffusing it amongst our brethren.





## CHRISTIANITY AN INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL FAITH.

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ROMANS xii. 1.

“ I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is *your reasonable service*.”

I PROPOSE especially to direct your attention at present to the last clause of this sentence.

It is, I should think, very commonly understood to mean, “ which is a service reasonably and properly required of you, such as you may be expected readily and cheerfully to pay :” but, though this may appear to be the natural meaning of the English words, and the remark so taken is very true in itself, it is a sense which the original will by no means bear. We find some commentators and paraphrasts explaining the clause, “ a service which is conformable with reason,” which is fitted for a reasonable being ; others again, “ a rational offering,” the offering up of that which possesses reason, as opposed to the offerings of brute and irrational creatures required by the Jewish Law. These may perhaps be possible explanations of the original word here translated *reasonable*, but I believe the interpretation which best expresses its true force,

and gives the clearest and most consistent sense to the passage, is, “a mental and spiritual service,” as opposed to the external forms and ceremonies in which so considerable a part of the Jewish institutions consisted, but which were to be entirely superseded by Christianity. The apostle exhorts the Roman Christians, that considering the mercies of God of which they were made partakers; reflecting on that admission to the privileges of the Gospel which was bestowed upon them by his free grace, and which for the future relieved them from burdensome ceremonies and multiplied ritual observances,—they would, instead of offering *from time to time*, as was now no longer required, the bodies of slaughtered animals, present unto God their own bodies, a *living* and therefore a *constant* sacrifice; an offering not depending for its acceptableness on being of a particular age and externally without blemish, nor upon any form of consecration employed, but sanctified by a holy life and conversation, and therefore in itself acceptable; a service spiritual and belonging to the mind—not outward and carnal—such as their profession required, and as ought to distinguish them from their less favoured fellow-creatures.

Let us endeavour to improve the present occasion, by dwelling a little on that characteristic distinction of Christianity, which I suppose to be

here expressed by the apostle, that it is a *spiritual* or *mental* service: let us consider what must be implied in such a declaration, and what its application is to our times and circumstances.

The immediate object with which Christianity is here represented as a *spiritual* service, is to contrast it with the *ceremonial* worship, not only of Paganism, but of Judaism. That it might be better adapted to its temporary purpose, and in condescension to the wants and capacities of an ignorant period, and an early stage in the progress of the human race, Judaism required the stated performance of certain acts of worship according to prescribed forms, as the condition of acceptance with God. The benefit of its just and ennobling principles, of its pure and excellent moral precepts, was not to be enjoyed except in connection with the ceremonial law, and it held out no hopes that any attention to them could avail to obtain the Divine favour, unless it were sought at the appointed place by fixed rites and offerings. All other religions consisted almost entirely of external acts of worship, which were most commonly degrading and absurd, too frequently impure and corrupting.

Christianity, on the contrary, has no prescribed place or forms of worship. Nothing external or ritual can essentially belong to it. It consists in

the influence of certain great principles on the mind and conduct. These principles are to be deduced from historical records and various documents, proved by good evidence to have the requisite authority, by the exercise of the natural powers of the human mind, being of course obtained in greater purity, and applied with greater success in proportion as well-cultivated powers are employed in the investigation, and as knowledge and intelligence are diffused throughout society. But they are obtained and applied altogether by means of reason and thought, and their benefit consists entirely in the state of the dispositions and affections, and consequently of the conduct which they produce. The apostle Paul speaks, in the Epistle to the Galatians, of Judaism as a dispensation to children, whilst the Gospel is adapted to the matured faculties. A system of external and minutely prescribed duties may be necessary for the production of the best attainable effects, in minds which are weak and unformed from the yet imperfect development either of the individual or of the species, but it is not in its nature fitted for reasonable and intelligent beings, and will always be laid aside by a wise and good governor, as soon as the ripening understanding will allow of its being dispensed with. Principles adopted by the reason, and

cherished in the heart, with the fondness which conviction produces, are a living spring of holy affections and virtuous actions ; mere rules, on the contrary, are obeyed with reluctance because they are to *be obeyed*, and are constantly liable to be misunderstood or evaded in particular instances. Principles, in being adopted and acted upon, constitute the happiness of those who receive them ; *forms* are only intended to produce right states of mind ; and all rules, moral as well as ceremonial, so long as they are mere rules, are only valuable for the degree in which they cause us to act towards others as if we had right principles, or tend to excite or cherish those principles in our minds. A truly spiritual religion shows its excellence in the working of principles perceived by the understanding to be right ; in the offering of services felt to be reasonable and useful, and in a course of conduct flowing from the convictions of a reflecting and inquiring mind.

It is opposed to a faith adopted as a matter of duty, and which it would be accounted a crime to question or examine ; to the scrupulous employment of external forms, which, though we dare not neglect them, and though they may exercise a certain habitual power over our feelings, are more likely to make us fancy ourselves good, than to promote our improvement in what is really excel-

lent; and to a moral system of detailed prohibitions and requirements, which makes us move through life as in fetters, or as if passing through a quagmire, in constant apprehension of sinking, which deprives our good actions of their grace and nature, and gives to evil all the attraction of an escape from restraint.

To correct the *belief* of men was undoubtedly one great purpose of the Christian dispensation—to inspire faith in the perfections and government of an unseen but all-powerful and ever-active ruler; to teach men to regard their God with the confidence and love as well as the reverence due to a father; to produce a certain and lively anticipation of the future state which he has ordained for his rational creatures; and to connect with it the clear conviction that a virtuous course can alone secure real and permanent happiness;—these are objects worthy of the mission of the Saviour of mankind, and they are most appropriately effected, by setting before us satisfactory grounds for believing that Jesus was indeed the authorized messenger of the Great Supreme, whose holy truth was on his lips, whilst its influence shone forth in all his conduct; that he was a ray of the glory, and a reflected image of the perfections of that infinite God whom no mortal hath seen or can see—commissioned to reveal his cha-



racter and designs, and to lead us into that way of true happiness which is the fulfilment of his will. But in what page of the sacred volume which records for our instruction the life, the miracles and the teachings of our Lord, do we find a creed set down, which we are commanded as an act of duty to profess, which there is merit in receiving, or criminality in calling in question? Where is the form of words which we are bound submissively to repeat, or where is the power communicated, by which either church or civil governor is authorized to interfere with the freedom of our thoughts or language? A rational belief is the effect of evidence considered by the mind, and naturally manifests itself by influencing the feelings and conduct. A belief received in obedience to authority, or as an act of duty, is an outward symbol employed, with which the intellect is little concerned, and of which the effects belong not so much to the opinion as to the prostration of mind which secures its reception. The evil of creeds consists in their being *enforced*, whether by motives of worldly hope and fear, or by connecting with their adoption the idea of duty, and employing for their support threats and promises relating to another state. Any man may express his opinions for the instruction of his fellow-creatures, but no one has a right to assume their certain truth, or to impose

them upon others by any means beyond stating the grounds of his own convictions. Any belief which results from thought and examination, even if mistaken methods of inquiry, and the want of needful knowledge, should cause it to be erroneous, belongs to a spiritual faith; but the slave of a creed is always confined to beggarly elements, to mere forms and outward acts, dry husks which afford no wholesome nourishment to the spiritual nature.

In like manner true religion unquestionably excites us to the *worship* of God. The prayer which brings our minds into conscious communion with the Divine mind, and calls into liveliest exercise our purest affections and holiest desires, is a privilege and a blessing, at once a means of improvement and a source of peace and consolation, to neglect which would show ignorance of our nature and wants, if not the absence of becoming feelings towards our Creator and Governor. The opportunities of advancing in religious knowledge, and of having the convictions of the understanding stimulated into active principles for the guidance of the conduct, will be undervalued by no wise man, and a faithful application of the public services and private offices of religion, as means of grace, may justly be regarded as one characteristic of true piety and virtue, but it has ever been a prevailing, as it is a most pernicious mis-

take, to confound the means with the end. There were very many amongst the Jews who imagined that the sacrifices and ceremonies of their law, which were in fact but an indulgence to their weakness, constituted the essence of their religion, and that those who scrupulously fulfilled them might be excused in departing from an inconveniently strict observance of justice, mercy and faithfulness. So among Christians,—in dark and ignorant ages, prayers and masses, pompous ceremonies and publicly-exhibited mortifications, were esteemed all-powerful in securing the Divine favour, and in later times the error has rather been reproduced under new forms, than really given way before the light of knowledge. When we see men evidently accounting it meritorious to multiply to the utmost the services of religion, perpetually occupied in the outward display of their zeal and piety, and condemning all the pleasures of life as if they thought the feeling of enjoyment in itself sinful, we can have no doubt in classing such persons as formalists, unless we should have reason for regarding them as hypocrites. With them it is plain, that outward signs of interest in religion pass for its substance; that to be religious is to listen to prayers and sermons, to keep apart from pleasures, to maintain a serious demeanour, or whatever else may please the zealots of a party,

whilst the benefit and the blessing of quiet, unobtrusive piety, cultivated by all proper means, and carried into all the affairs of life, but not manifesting itself in a sanctified deportment, or seeming to say to others, "stand off, for I am holier than thou,"—they cannot be brought to understand. Religion itself is so unspeakably valuable, that serious attempts to cultivate its spirit, where the means do not interfere with the end, must always be respected, even should we not think the means employed most judicious and effective; but in proportion as we respect religion, we are disgusted with cant, and its prevalence causes even more alarm for the cause we love, than the open attacks of unbelievers, which indeed will never long be absent, when such a mark is set up for their scoffs and reproaches. An *intellectual* service is essentially a service of which rites and forms constitute no necessary or prescribed part; in which there is nothing *merely* ceremonial—in which the offering presented is that of a pure and devout mind, and outward observances are only employed so far as they are required by the social spirit of our nature, for the best use of the means of improvement. Men give undue importance to the external part of religion, from not understanding and appreciating the spiritual part, and, in doing so, they are enslaved and degraded.

It is a very remarkable fact, that the spiritual character of Christianity extends even to its mode of influencing the actions in the ordinary conduct of life. It contains no *code* of moral laws. It does not undertake to give us rules, which we have only to remember and obey. The instructions of our Lord and his apostles are not dry, general maxims—though, perhaps, they are often ignorantly taken as such—they are advices adapted to the particular cases and circumstances of persons addressed, or remarks arising out of passing events, and they become truly useful to us when, having understood their first intention, and felt their justice and propriety, we catch the spirit which dictated them, and are prepared to regulate, by its influence, our own conduct. It is not possible for any system of rules to be directly applicable in different ages and countries, nor is it possible for any rules so to meet the endless variety of human circumstances, as for obedience to be sufficient without the exercise of the judgment, and a necessity for the guiding influence of certain grand and important principles. It is when the principles are exhibited as applied in particular cases, which at the same time illustrate their beauty and excellence, that the intellectual powers are exercised, whilst the moral taste is formed; that whilst we study the narrative, we imbibe the spirit of the



teacher, and our own conduct is from day to day more and more animated by that pure and elevated piety, that strict integrity, that steady control over the meaner appetites and passions, and that warm and disinterested benevolence, which are so powerfully recommended by our master's discourses, and yet more effectually taught by his actions.

We are not, as Christians, asked for a blind unmeaning submission to a certain code of laws, but for the use of our powers of reasoning and reflection, in understanding our relation to God as our Father and Governor, and the prospects which his mercy opens to us, in order that the knowledge of these most important circumstances in our condition may have a due influence over us, and may lead us to all that is good, as belonging to our situation, and essential to our true happiness—and that the gilded baits of unlawful pleasure, and the false allurements of vice, being understood by us in their real character, may be rejected as destructive of our peace. Morality—even Christian morality—is often taught as if it consisted entirely in bending our minds to obedience to a system of laws, because God, as our sovereign, has a right to require it; but this narrow view will not satisfy the enlightened Christian.

It is true, we must obey, and we cannot always understand the way in which this obedience is to

promote our happiness—but it is an obedience which results from the use of the understanding, and the exercise of the affections; an obedience not to mere formal rules, but to the conviction that our God is love—that what he requires, as well as what he appoints, is ordained in wisdom and kindness, and that we cannot devote ourselves to his service without thereby ensuring our felicity. It is an obedience which results from our own lively participation in those holy and benignant sentiments which belong to our religion, and which we feel that our hearts approve and cherish, even when they cause us present suffering or self-denial. Such, my brethren, be our Christian obedience and moral self-restraint—a spirit of love and of hope, a spirit of knowledge and of power, not of slavish submission, degrading fear, or blind, formal conformity to the letter of the precept.

Having endeavoured to explain the sense in which Christianity requires a spiritual offering, and to contrast its real nature with some prevailing abuses to which it is exposed, I proceed to offer a few reflections which occur to me as being of practical importance. And first I will observe that the view of Christian doctrine, which *we* most of us regard as alone defensible by a just interpretation of Scripture, and as alone harmonizing



natural with revealed religion into one beautiful and perfect whole, adapts itself peculiarly well to the doctrine delivered by the apostle in the text. Ours is naturally a spiritual system. We reject all human creeds with abhorrence, as impositions on conscience and unjustifiable interferences with that intellectual freedom which God has given as our common birthright. Our public services are much more considered as means of improvement, much less resorted to as acts of duty, than those of most other sects, and we are apt to imagine them more fitted to exercise the reasoning powers, to communicate real knowledge, and to act on the affections by means of the understanding. We probably exhibit also less disposition to govern and control each other than most of our Christian brethren.

The object of our social religion is to provide means of improvement and excitements to piety and holiness, not to watch each other or call each other to account for what we may disapprove. Whatever government may have existed and been necessary in early times, we know not that Christ has authorized any to become rulers over their brethren in his name, and we have seen too much of the abuses of such power to permit its existence amongst us. We may then perhaps claim to be, as compared with others, a free, intelligent, and in-

quiring class of Christians, peculiarly disposed to acknowledge and act upon the spiritual character of our religion. All this is our glory and privilege, but it becomes us to be very careful lest, as too commonly happens, in our eagerness to avoid one evil, we should run into an opposite one.

Let us take care, that in rejecting creeds and refusing to be bound to formularies of doctrine, we do not become indifferent to truth, the greatest of all blessings, the source of happiness and goodness! Let us take care that, in our anxiety to free our worship from superstition and formality, we do not render it cold, and that we do not permit ourselves to neglect it, because we justly account it as only a means of grace. If we see no advantage in multiplying services, as some do, let those which we do adopt, and which long experience has sanctioned, be attended with the zeal which the importance of their object claims; and let it not be our reproach that a pure and rational worship, not tainted with superstition, or deformed by rant, is insufficient to excite our interest.

Let our individual independence only impress us with a deeper sense of our personal responsibility, and professing to live under the law of the spirit, not of the flesh; let the great principles of our holy faith be cherished in our hearts by meditation and prayer, so that they may shine forth in our

daily actions, and exert their influence over our whole character and conduct.

*Secondly.* It might perhaps be thought of as an objection to the view I have given of the nature of Christianity as a spiritual and intellectual religion, that it is not thus equally well adapted to the poor and ignorant, whom nevertheless, as much at least as any other class, it must be believed that our Saviour came to serve and bless. What I deny is, that a religion, by appealing to the reason and employing the best faculties of the mind, is the less fitted for the great body of God's reasonable and intelligent creatures. In affirming Christianity to be a spiritual faith, we mean that it appeals to and exercises the reason; that it produces its influences by means of the noblest powers of our nature; and what must follow from this but that it is adapted to our nature, and it there confers the greatest benefit where in other ways the noblest powers are least exercised. Who should most need and most enjoy an intellectual faith, but those whom their circumstances do not allow to employ their intellect on the stores of ancient learning or modern science, but who yet possess faculties capable of enjoying mental activity, and of separating the pure gold of truth from the ore in which it is often concealed or deformed? Who

can compare, as a benefit to the poor and the unlearned, a religion which leaves them contented with ignorance and mental torpor, or at best only excites the imagination with vague hopes and terrors, with one which regularly employs the reason, connects itself with knowledge, excites reflection, and subdues the animal nature by giving force and vigour to the spiritual part?

One sense in which the Gospel is peculiarly fitted for the poor, is that the thought and inquiry it calls for is of especial use to them, and is a source to them of especial pleasure: at least if there is any one class more than another which can justly be said to be especially benefited by the intellectual influences of true religion, I should take that class to be the poor, though when I think how much these influences are also needed by others, I can scarcely allow that any difference exists. Assuredly, however, he whose labours afford him least time to seek knowledge or cultivate his mind, and who has been least in the way of enjoying the advantages of education, is still a thinking and reasoning being. He is capable of knowing his Maker by his works and word, of learning something of his government and designs, of judging what conduct is most wise and happy for the present, and of enjoying glorious hopes for the future. Christianity received and che-

rished in its true spirit will open all these blessings to him—and they are better far than all else which the world has to offer him. They are blessings in themselves, and the very attainment of them is itself delightful, but they belong to the religion of the mind and the affections, and are forbidden to blind faith, to weak superstition, and to wild enthusiasm.

*Lastly.* Believers in the spiritual character of religion must of course be zealous promoters of all means for the cultivation of the mind and the advancement of knowledge. Those who are in perpetual alarm lest education should produce scepticism, and lest science should interfere with some article of religious faith, are those whose religion is a slavery to creeds and rules, who fear lest God should be offended with them for adopting the conclusions to which their reason conducts them, and who can shut their eyes to the plainest facts, or refuse assent to the clearest deductions from them, rather than alter one jot or one tittle of what they have learned as an act of duty to receive with uninquiring reverence. They on the contrary who regard religion as an intellectual service, value it for the truths it communicates and the use it enables them to make of the truths they may otherwise discover, but they can form no conception of a benefit arising from ignorance, or



of an obligation to refuse to accept evidence, or to resist conviction on any subject whatever. They are friends of fearless inquiry; lovers of simple, unadulterated truth on every subject of human thought; confident that with truth, practical good is indissolubly connected; and not daring to decide that on any subject, truth is so fully and certainly known that further examination and reflection can be useless or dangerous. Their hopes and endeavours are for the *progress* as well as the *diffusion* of knowledge, and their warm sympathies are with all labours for these noble ends, from the humblest means adopted to form the rising generation to habits of reflection and intelligence, to store their minds with knowledge, and imbue them with liberal sentiments and enlightened piety, to the highest efforts of genius in the service of mankind, and the highest institutions for encouraging the inquiring spirit, and exciting to the love and communication of truth. In all they view knowledge as the handmaid of religion—active thought as the instrument of an improvement which cannot be confined to mere external things,—truth as the unfailing spring of virtue and of happiness. In all they fearlessly and confidently rejoice, certain that even if there should be any partial and temporary evil, good must be the real and ultimate result, and lending their

humble aid in the persuasion that if a pure and simple, a refined and spiritual religion, is to prevail, and its inestimable blessings are to be diffused, it must be in connection with the progress of knowledge, and with the better cultivation of those noble faculties of our intellectual nature, to devote which to the honour and service of God is the best and most acceptable offering which our nature will permit us to make.



## THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE INFLUENCES.

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1 JOHN iv. 1.

“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God.”

THESE words of the apostle are of great importance for showing the true character of Christianity. They afford an unequivocal sanction of the use of inquiry and individual judgment in matters of religion ; they represent these as of peculiar necessity at a time when *many false prophets* were abroad, and thus hold them forth as affording the proper defence of religion against corruption and opposition ; lastly, (which renders them suitable to my present purpose,) they contain an express charge to Christians not to believe all pretensions to spiritual gifts, but subjecting them to a fair trial, to require reasonable conviction of their genuineness, before any regard is paid to them in the regulation of our religious faith or practice. Among the first Christians, to whom the apostolic advice was immediately addressed, extraordinary and miraculous powers of various kinds *were* generally diffused, and these appear to have

been pretended to by false teachers, who perverted to their own purposes the doctrines of the Gospel. Nor is there less occasion in modern times for trying the spirits, since notwithstanding that the spiritual gifts of the first disciples have confessedly ceased, certain gifts of the spirit are still pretended to by a large proportion of Christians, to form some judgment of the reality and genuineness of which is a matter of great interest to us all; indeed, it may be necessary for many persons to try not only the pretensions of others, but also their own, to the special influences of the Holy Spirit, that by the application of some fair and rational criteria they may determine whether the feelings and sentiments which they account for in this manner, do really afford sufficiently certain and convincing indications of the high origin they are disposed to ascribe to them. The early Christians had to try the claims of *individuals*, some of whom really, as all believers in Christianity believe, possessed the gifts which others feigned. They had to distinguish between truth and artifice, between the spirit of Christ and the spirit of Antichrist. Our case is different; for since it is acknowledged, except by those whom we regard as the wildest enthusiasts, that external miraculous signs have altogether ceased, and since without them all persons representing themselves as enjoying spiritual

guidance, instruction or support, stand on the same ground, it is a *general* question which we have to examine. If we decide affirmatively, we seem bound to acknowledge the claims of all those who seriously and without imposture are persuaded that they enjoy Divine influences ; at least we can show no sufficient reason for believing in some and rejecting others—we make an arbitrary choice, which we can scarcely attempt to justify by evidence : if negatively, we reject them all, as supposing those who made them to be deceived by their own imagination, and in their several degrees to be doing injury to pure religion.

In conducting our inquiry it will be proper for us to consider whether Christians of the present day have any reason from the Scriptures for expecting supernatural or immediate assistance ; whether we can have any sufficient reason for believing that others, or even that we ourselves enjoy it, unless proved by some unequivocal external sign ; whether the supposition of the reality of the Divine influences be at all necessary to account for the pretension being made, or for the prevailing belief in them ; and what are the practical effects of the doctrine.

In the first place, it will be proper to give some account of the different degrees in which the doctrine of Divine influences is held by different

sects of Christians. In our established church the bishop undertakes to communicate the *Holy Spirit* to the candidate for ordination; and although it might be difficult to say exactly what is meant by this phrase, there can be no doubt of its having been originally intended to imply, and implying as understood by most of those interested in the matter, something *supernatural*. In one sect, public religious assemblies wait in silence until an immediate influence of the spirit lead some one to speak, and the individual is then thought to speak, not of his own knowledge, powers, or feelings, but what the spirit puts into his mouth. By others it is believed that every real Christian must become so by conversion, an agitating process which is considered as the work of the spirit in his mind. Many are persuaded that spiritual gifts are immediately drawn down into the assemblies of Christians by prayer, and that supernatural influences are manifested in the groans, extravagant gestures and enthusiastic feelings of those who are present. Many believe that the doctrines which they embrace have been communicated to them by the spirit, or at least are confident that in reading the Scriptures they enjoy such Divine guidance as to be directed *with certainty* to their right understanding. They have prayed for light, and have felt it come to them, and they cannot, they fancy,

be in the wrong. It is *generally* believed that fervent prayer is followed by certain special and immediate influences, which are not natural, but belong peculiarly by Divine favour to true religion, and are only not to be called miraculous because the miracle is a continued one, the same spiritual influences being accessible to *all* who seek for them by the right means. Some who believe in these Divine influences are yet very cautious in guarding as much as possible against what may be thought enthusiastic or superstitious ; they are certain, as they say, from fact and experience, that good and pious men are, as the effect of prayer, by some spiritual influences consoled in sorrow, supported in trial, and aided in their search after truth ; and they will have these influences to be *immediate*, or communicated directly from God *independently* of the *natural* working of the mind, yet they deny that they are *miraculous* or *supernatural*. It is a distinction which I cannot, I confess, perfectly understand ; for if it be meant that God exercises a spiritual providence over his creatures distinct from his general providence, or forming a peculiar branch of it, according to which these influences are given, still, though it may not be thought correct to call them *miraculous*, they are surely *supernatural*, as they are independent of, and are accustomed to lead and over-

come, the natural workings of the mind. They do not *arise out of* our physical or mental constitution, but *act upon them*, and in this properly consists the difference between those who believe and those who reject spiritual influences. The believer in them may refuse to call them miraculous, as the providence of God in his opinion holds them out to all who seek them by proper means, and he who rejects them may believe the effects of prayer to be the gifts of God and the fruits of religion, because he considers God's Providence as universal, and his active energy as appearing in the fulfilment of all his laws, so that every thing which occurs in the course of nature is properly his immediate act, but the difference consists in this: the believer in Divine influences supposes effects to be produced independently of our natural constitution; supposes an interference, no matter how often repeated, with the natural course of causes and effects. It is this which I deny and reject, and I maintain that if it be admitted in any form we give up the principle, the ground of argument, to those who make the highest pretensions I have noticed, and open the door for all sorts of delusions. We ourselves may avoid them, but we cannot say why they should not be believed; we cannot reason against them with clearness and consistency. A Christian brother,



labouring (as we are persuaded) under a delusion, believes that the spirit of truth has enlightened his mind, and that, under its guidance, he cannot err. He *knows* he is in the right, and will hear no reasoning to the contrary; he relies on what is above all reasoning, Divine communication; he has felt it and is confident. I may think all this presumptuous and absurd, yet what *argument* can I use against it; why should I urge him to doubt, if I myself am prepared to say, I have in the hour of deep affliction felt, in prayer to God, a consolation more than human—an indescribable comfort, which must have been the immediate gracious communication of God; it is my feeling that it came directly from him, and I cannot doubt it. What is pleaded for may be less revolting to reason in the one case than in the other, but the ground is the same, and if there be sufficient evidence for believing the one, there must be, also, for believing the other.

It is generally supposed, that the Christian Scriptures are exceedingly plain in their promises of extraordinary assistance, direction, and support to those who seek for it by earnest and fervent prayer; and individuals differing widely as to the nature and degree of these communications, are equally confident in their belief that they are promised. To me, however, the passages referred to



on this subject are by no means satisfactory, relating, all of them, as I think, either to the ordinary course of Providence, or to those extraordinary and miraculous gifts of the early disciples which unquestionably belonged to the machinery employed in the introduction and establishment of our religion, but had no connection with its influence on the conduct and affections, and were neither intended nor fitted to be permanently attached to it. The notice which I shall take of some of the most important texts will, I trust, be sufficient to warrant this view of the question.

In Matt. xxviii. 20, we have the promise of our Lord—"Lo, I am with you always,"—i. e. it is explained, in the Divine influences which I will bestow on you—"to the end of the world." When it is observed, that the proper translation is, "to the end of the age"—meaning, as it would seem, from a careful comparison of passages in which the phrase occurs, until the final abolition of Judaism, at the destruction of Jerusalem—it will be manifest, that this promise refers to the miraculous assistance afforded to the first Christians. The similar promise, Matt. xviii. 20, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them," may also, without hesitation, be confined to the apostolic age, and to miraculous powers. I will mention one more text

of this kind, Matt. xiii. 4—"When they shall lead you and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate—but whatever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Spirit." It is acknowledged by all believers, that the first age of the church was an age of miracles and supernatural gifts, and that those extraordinary aids have long since ceased. The promises made in these passages are promises of miraculous assistance, and are always found in discourses addressed to the apostles, in reference to their peculiar situation, as the teachers and promulgators of the Gospel; what, then, can be more natural and just, than to interpret them as temporary promises? The concluding part of the Gospel of John is very instructive on the subject of spiritual gifts. Nothing can well be clearer, than that our Lord is here promising those gifts which first descended on the day of Pentecost, and which are acknowledged to have been peculiar to the apostolic age; among these we find instruction in the truth, and prophetic knowledge, besides outward signs; but *we* have precisely the same claims to the former and to the latter.

If we consider that, in the first age, the miraculous gifts of the spirit were very generally, if not universally, diffused amongst Christians, as

appears from various passages in Paul's epistles, we shall perceive that they do not occupy more of the notice of the sacred writers than the circumstances of the early Church rendered necessary, and we may learn to be cautious in applying to ourselves language which belonged exclusively to the apostolic times. Thus when Paul prays that his converts may enjoy the *communion* or participation of the Holy Spirit, he means of "miraculous powers," in which we must not hope to participate, and which we have no encouragement to wish or pray for: this language, therefore, cannot properly be applied by us to ourselves, or our brethren. When the same apostle talks of the "earnest of the Spirit," of being "sealed with the Spirit," &c., he speaks of external miraculous signs, accompanying the disciples in the first age, not of anything which was common to them with true Christians in every period.

Whenever, in any part of the New Testament, the gifts of the spirit there promised—and be it recollected that there is but one kind spoken of; there is no distinction there made between the temporary and the permanent—whenever these gifts are described and particularized, they are found to be, not influences on the mind calculated for the advantage of the individual, but faculties and powers especially qualifying him to be a

teacher of the Gospel, or enabling him to exhibit proofs of its divine origin and authority. Paul had occasion, 1 Cor. xii. 8, 9, 10, to enumerate the various gifts bestowed on the disciples, according to the promise of Christ, yet he says not a word of Divine influences, similar to those pretended to by Christians of the present day: his list is as follows:—1, the word of wisdom—meaning, a divinely enlightened judgment as to the best means of promoting the Gospel; 2, the word of knowledge—a miraculous acquaintance with the genuine doctrines of the Gospel, such as was requisite for its first teachers; 3, faith—by which is here meant, not a belief in the truth of Christianity, or in its peculiar doctrines, but a divinely communicated confidence in God's showing wonders by our means, as appears from the beginning of the following chapter—"though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains,"—where it is the apostle's object to show the worthlessness of *extraordinary gifts* compared with Christian love; 4, gifts of healing; 5, the working of *other* miracles; 6, the power of prophecy; 7, discerning of spirits—the gift of miraculously distinguishing those who speak with a divine impulse from impostors, which must have been among the less common gifts, or the precept of the text would not have been necessary; 8, different kinds

of languages; and, 9, the power of interpreting languages. Now, how very different these gifts of the apostolic age, which were suitable for the establishment of a new religion, and for qualifying men to be its teachers and propagators, are from any which can, with any decency, be pretended to in these times, I may safely submit to the judgment of every candid inquirer.

There is not, so far as I know, a single passage of Scripture, which directly sanctions the idea that spiritual gifts, of any kind, were designed to be continued in all ages of the Church. This is generally inferred, merely by an unfounded application to ourselves of promises made immediately to the first disciples; but there are, if I mistake not, passages which necessarily lead to the contrary conclusion—yet we need no more than the fact, that of the only spiritual gifts of which we have any accounts in the New Testament, all *authentic* accounts cease with the first age. It seems to me sufficiently clear, that in 1 Cor. xiii. the Apostle Paul contemplates a time when the gifts of the spirit should no longer be possessed by Christians; and that it is in reference to this time that he speaks of faith, hope, and charity, the *Christian virtues*, as abiding or continuing. In the preceding chapter, he had been endeavouring to satisfy the Corinthians respecting the differ-

ences of their miraculous gifts, and to allay the jealousy and discontent which this circumstance had occasioned among them. He here proceeds to insist on the worthlessness of these gifts, unless accompanied by those graces of the mind, which are the genuine fruits of the Gospel, and especially by *love*, the most excellent of Christian virtues, and in fact the vital principle of the religion of Jesus, in which, he would insinuate, the Corinthians by their disputes showed themselves to be somewhat deficient. In order to display the superiority of this virtue over miraculous gifts, he remarks that *it never faileth*; that its importance and obligation can never cease, whilst all extraordinary gifts are designed to answer a temporary purpose, and will accordingly in a short time be withdrawn. "Charity never faileth; but whether there be prophecies," i. e. powers of prophesying, "they shall fail: whether there be tongues," the gift of speaking various languages, "they shall cease; whether there be knowledge," miraculous knowledge, "it shall vanish away." But independently of those passages of Scripture really relating to miraculous gifts, which are often applied to the case of modern Christians, there are some others which have been appealed to on this subject, and which deserve our serious attention before we decide upon it. Thus Phil. ii. 13: "For it is God that worketh in you



both to will and to do of his good pleasure," which is explained, that both our virtuous desires, and our strength for virtuous action, come immediately from God, so that the personal exertions which are required from us would be useless without his express and immediate aid. It seems to me, on the contrary, that the words refer to the aids afforded us by God in the course of his Providence. We are to work out our salvation with a reverent regard to that Divine goodness which by the instructions and encouragements of the Gospel communicates to us both the desire and the means of doing what is right. We are to labour ourselves, but with humility, remembering that we owe every thing to God's grace, which gave the glorious Gospel of our Saviour, and caused us to hear its blessed sound.

Besides, this text I have seen particularly appealed to in favour of Divine influences, by one who holds the doctrine in its most moderate and rational form, and endeavours to distinguish what he claims from the spiritual gifts of the first age: the prayer of Peter, that "the God of all grace would make the believers perfect, establish, strengthen, settle them;" the prayer of Paul, that "God would sanctify them wholly; that he would comfort their hearts, and establish them in every good word and work;" the prayer of Christ,

“Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one as we are one;” “and in short,” concludes the writer, “if it were not true that God influences the hearts of those who seek him, the prayers of saints in all ages for spiritual blessings for themselves or others have all been founded in delusion.” That the prayers of many good men have to a certain degree been founded in delusion, is unquestionably the fact; but it does not follow that every expression of a pious and affectionate wish for our brethren, or every earnest desire for what is needful for ourselves, should be so; for we may pray with fervour and with the humble hope of success, without any belief in immediate or supernatural influences, because the expression of our desires in submission to the Divine will is natural, reasonable and pious, and we have good ground for believing, both from Scripture and experience, that it is among the appointed means of cultivating those dispositions and affections which are most important for our real welfare and happiness. Whatever effect is produced is however according to the ordinary course of Providence, and to the natural action of our feelings and principles, in consistency with the moral constitution of our frame, not any direct or immediate communication. The prayers of the apostles above referred

to, are the expressions of pious and benevolent wishes, not for any extraordinary aids, but for the full efficacy and success of the Gospel by the means already employed. With respect to the prayer of our Lord here quoted, it does not to my mind appear reasonable to suppose that it was employed as a means for effecting the object, but as at once a warm expression of his own benevolent wishes, and an encouragement, and, as it were, prophetic assurance to his disciples. Of the character of these public addresses of our Saviour, we may judge from what he said at the grave of Lazarus, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I know indeed that thou hearest me always: *but because of the multitude* who stand by I have said this, that they may believe that thou hast sent me."

Having spoken thus much of the Scripture evidence in favour of modern spiritual gifts, let us proceed to inquire in what cases we are justified in believing in the reality of pretended supernatural or immediate influences, and what proofs we ought to demand before we allow ourselves to be in any way directed or affected by them. It is rightly maintained that a disposition readily to believe the evidence of testimony is the most natural state of the human mind; that we learn to doubt from finding that we have been deceived, and

seldom feel disposed to disbelieve, except when our previous knowledge or experience seems inconsistent with what is related to us, or the narrator has previously proved himself a deceiver. But this can of course be true only with respect to facts cognizable by the senses. Our belief in testimony is *receiving the experience of others instead of our own*, without which our knowledge must indeed be confined, and we could not even go through the ordinary affairs of a single day of our existence. But though we must necessarily be content to employ the senses of other persons in extending our knowledge, and cannot help acting on a belief in their testimony in a vast variety of cases, yet if we wish to know with certainty and to act with wisdom, we must exercise our judgments as to what we believe; and when men assert what is in itself improbable, what they may have a particular motive for wishing us to believe, or what they were not in a situation or state of mind to perceive accurately, we should suspend our belief, *much more* should we cautiously withhold our assent in a case which could not at all have come under the cognizance of the senses, but is altogether a matter of opinion or imagination. Now this is precisely the case with all the accounts of extraordinary communications and immediate Divine influences *unaccompanied by miracles*.

We in these times at once reject a ghost story, however apparently well authenticated, as absurd and unworthy of serious regard, and we do so with good reason, not because we refuse to hear testimony to extraordinary facts, but because whilst such narrations are inconsistent with our own experience, and with opinions which we consider as having the best foundation in reason and revelation, they admit of various simple and natural explanations. It may be the interest or the amusement of some person to excite terror; or situation, surrounding scenery, or a particular state of mind and feelings, may have predisposed the imagination of the witness for being powerfully excited, so as to find for itself, in some trifling and indifferent object, a subject for awe and fear; and we observe that in all such relations the scene is unfavourable to cautious investigation, and the object is perceived only by one sense. But in every relation of a supernatural *appearance*, where the witness is not an impostor, the senses of at least one individual have been deceived. Now if we readily allow that the imagination may have, and often has, such power as to deceive the senses, how much more likely is it that it may deceive where the senses are not at all appealed to; and if we are justified in many cases in rejecting even without particular inquiry, ac-

counts relating to *external appearances*, how much more are we *required* to reject accounts of inward illuminations and influences on the mind, which are not capable of so much evidence as the most ridiculous ghost story.

If pretensions to supernatural feelings and influences were confined to the members of any one Christian sect, or to the professors of Christianity generally, or of any religion which does exist, or ever has existed, they might require more consideration ; but where is the age or the nation which has not produced individuals pretending to inspiration and extraordinary assistance ? and where is the distinction, *so long as well-authenticated miracles are not exhibited*, between the ancient and the modern, the Heathen and the Christian, the Papist and the evangelical enthusiast ? What strange contradictions are they bound to receive who will believe every man on his mere assertion, that he enjoys supernatural assistance, and how inconsistent and unreasonable is their conduct, if without any difference in the evidence they admit the pretensions of some according to their own choice, but not of all ! At this moment, not to leave our own country, and to put out of the question all ancient and distant claims, how must the mind of that man be distracted by doubt, and disturbed by the perpetual



clashing of discordant opinions, who listens to the dicta of any enthusiast who persuades himself that he enjoys the influences of the Holy Spirit: and yet in the total absence of all external signs, how is he to determine whom he will believe, unless he will take the height of extravagance as an index of the measure of inspiration, and consider the absence of reason as a proof of the presence of the spirit?

The situation of those persons is certainly very different who make no pretensions to communications of infallible truth, and show no desire to lead their brethren, who disclaim as much as possible the idea of any thing supernatural, and only suppose that they receive *immediate* aids from the Father of spirits; but I have shown that the distinction between *supernatural* and *immediate* cannot be sustained; that whatever is not the natural and ordinary result of the constitution of the human mind, is supernatural, however regularly or diffusively bestowed; and what is natural cannot be *immediate* in any proper sense: for *immediate*, if it mean anything, means independently of the course of nature. As therefore it is extremely important to decide on the character of these more modest and harmless claims, as well as of those which seem to us more extravagant, we must come to the question of *their evidence*, and

we shall find that it is simply *the persuasion of the* INDIVIDUAL, which, if received, would *equally serve* the wildest enthusiast.

The only proper and credible proof which can be afforded by any person, of his having received communications or influences of any kind, out of the ordinary course of nature and Providence, or which differ from the natural workings of a human mind, under his circumstances and opinions, is the exhibition of a miracle. This proof our Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles and first disciples were enabled to afford. This proof was also given by all the most distinguished of God's ancient prophets and messengers, and by all who exercised authority in his name, or acted for him, excepting at least in some cases of prophecy alone, where the fulfilment of near predictions served to justify belief in the more remote,—and that too as a regular part of a dispensation already established by abundant miraculous evidences; and we ought unhesitatingly to reject all claims to inspiration or spiritual guidance and assistance of whatsoever kind or degree, where this proof is not set before us. If we do not, we weaken the evidence of Divine Revelation. We place enthusiasts who can produce no higher authority than their own assertions respecting their inward feelings, almost on a level with those inspired teachers

of old, who, whilst they revealed the future to the eye of faith, delivered the doctrines of Divine truth, and spake the words of heavenly wisdom, gave satisfactory testimonies of the source from whence they derived their knowledge in the miracles, and signs, and wonders which God did by them, which were done openly and publicly, and submitted to the examination of their enemies as well as friends, so as to exclude the possibility of deceit, and establish a just claim to general belief.

I must add a few words as to the evidence which is necessary before we can be justified in any of us believing that we ourselves receive spiritual guidance, assistance, or support, or any direct communications from above ; and here, as before, it seems to me necessary that we should insist on some external sign, plainly exhibited to others as well as ourselves, and appropriated to us as a proof of our intercourse with God, by our being enabled to foretell and command it, which is I think an accurate description of a miracle. The reasoning already employed is as applicable to this case as to our judgment of the pretensions of others ; only it may be well here to insist a little more upon the point of our being liable to be so deceived by our imaginations, that we have no right to trust to inward feelings alone as esta-

blishing any preternatural communications. It is an extraordinary fact, that when Lord Herbert, of Cherburg, whose name should always be mentioned with respect, for his virtues and good intentions, though he is ranked amongst Deistical writers, was in doubt as to the propriety of giving to the world the principal of his publications, his scruples were overcome by his imagining that he received a visible and sensible sign from heaven. There is no reason for doubting Lord Herbert's sincerity. His narrative shows that though assuming the character of a philosopher, he was really an enthusiast, and it illustrates the necessity of our being cautious how we trust even to supposed external signs which we have no part in producing, and which are witnessed by none but ourselves; and how much more reason have we for caution, when we have to do, not with our *senses*, but with our *feelings*. Let any man of lively sensibility and warm imagination recollect his feelings in moments of ecstatic devotion, when under the influence of the more sublime and romantic scenes of nature, the wonders of art, or the nobler productions of genius, and if education and deeply-rooted opinions have preserved him from such delusion, he can at least easily conceive how the idea of supernatural influences may get possession of the mind which is previously prepared for it, and may see how in

certain cases ideas, sentiments and affections may be excited with so peculiar a vividness and energy as to be considered as having a different origin from our ordinary states of mind.

When we have subtracted the vast and melancholy sum of interested deceivers, there will remain on the long list of pretenders to Divine influences, very many who can be considered in no other light than as the victims of self-delusion, as having mistaken natural feelings and impressions for Divine communications, and if they have deceived others, having first been deceived themselves. To guard ourselves against similar delusions it is necessary that we should maintain the dominion of reason over our feelings and passions, and cautiously "try the spirits, whether they be of God." We should never suffer our opinions and previous decisions to be influenced by our *feelings* in moments of enthusiasm, produced by events or situations of peculiar interest, but give to the calm and sober hour of reflection the control over our judgments and the direction of our conduct. We should be especially careful that motives of interest or of vanity do not secretly associate themselves with feelings excited by impressive events or situations, so as to inspire us with the belief that we are favoured with peculiar guidance or assistance, and produce changes in the religious

state of our minds which dispassionate reason cannot approve, and which cannot promote our real advancement in Christian excellence.

On the question whether the supposition of the reality of Divine influences be at all necessary to account for the pretensions made to them, or for the general belief in them, I need now add very few words; the difference between those who believe in them and those who deny them is, it must be recollected, respecting the proper mode of accounting for certain states of mind which are by all known and acknowledged to exist. On the one side it is maintained that they are produced by immediate Divine influences; on the other, that they arise out of natural causes, and result from the general laws of the human mind. Now if it be recollected that each religious party, whilst confident of having directly received from God certain feelings of their own, without difficulty perceives the pretensions of *others* to be delusive, we shall see that it is upon the whole generally acknowledged that *natural causes* are capable of producing all the symptoms: and as for the prevailing belief, that we know to be a most uncertain and deceitful criterion of truth; and if we be at all intelligent and active in forming just opinions, we are accustomed frequently to set it aside.



Those who suppose that the effects which have been produced by enthusiastic preachers, even on those who had gone to hear them with feelings of ridicule or contempt, are unaccountable on natural principles, need only recur to the enthusiasm of certain Pagan priests and prophets, and to various instances of communicated enthusiasm in the history of those whom they will not readily suspect of being divinely influenced. As to those more quiet and secret feelings which some so confidently attribute to the immediate agency of God, it need only be asked, according to the nature of our minds, what other effects could our religious principles and hopes, and our contemplation of God and heavenly things, produce, than these very consolations, supports and aids which are thus hastily ascribed to an extraneous cause? Or what is the value of our Christian principles, if such effects do not arise out of them?

We now come to our last inquiry respecting the actual utility of Divine influences continued in the church, and the practical effects of belief in them. If a Divine influence on the mind be now necessary for conversion, i. e. for producing a sufficient and effectual belief, with a corresponding change of mind and character, the various evidences of the truth and authority of our holy religion, which have been preserved amidst the revolutions of

human affairs, are altogether useless, being unable to produce in the mind a genuine and saving faith. If we cannot attain to the true sense and right understanding of the sacred Scriptures without our minds being illumined with supernatural light, the same Divine effusion might as easily instruct us in *all that is necessary*, unassisted by the written word, and the Scriptures might as well have perished in those ages of darkness, during which a watchful Providence protected and multiplied them. If the glorious promises of the Gospel, and the animating and delightful hopes it is fitted to inspire, cannot support the mind under affliction, and afford it consolation in suffering, unless aided by a balm of *miraculous* power, are they not then insufficient for their purpose, and might not the heavenly gift have been as well bestowed alone? If the precepts of an inspired instructor, and the plain exhibition of the opposite consequences of virtue and vice cannot, when duly and habitually considered, give strength to resist temptation and afford sufficient motives for perseverance in the paths of holiness and virtue, to what end, I would ask, do we read our Bibles? What are we to gain by the study of our Saviour's words and actions? Why was a revelation given to us which, without a continued miracle, is unequal to our salvation? or what

cause have we to rejoice in its light, unless we can also be sure that we have received those supernatural gifts without which it can be of no service to us?

Even the most moderate notions of Divine influences cannot, as it appears to me, be defended from the charge of lowering the value of religious *principles*, by ascribing what properly belongs *to them* to an extraneous cause. Why does the good and pious man enjoy a peace above what the world can give? Why do sweet and soothing consolations spring up in his mind in the hour of bereavement and sorrow? Whence does he derive those supplies of strength, which enable him to triumph over suffering and temptation? What are those aids which he experiences in his sincere endeavours to improve in Christian knowledge and virtue? The believer in Divine influences considers all these blessings as being *directly* and *immediately* communicated from our heavenly Father, in answer to our prayers. But how much more beautifully do they show forth the excellence of our holy faith, when regarded as its own fruits, as its genuine effects on the heart of the sincere and faithful disciple!—the prayer being only the means of calling forth these effects into more lively and active exercise.

The practical usefulness of the example of our

Lord Jesus Christ himself, depends a great deal upon our conviction, that the transcendent excellences and beauties which his character displays are not either the necessary result of a superior nature, or the effect of immediate irresistible influences from above, but are the consequences—according to the constitution and laws of the human mind—of the clear and constant perception of the Divine presence and perfections, and the full and perfect conviction of those truths respecting God's character, will, and purposes, which he came to make known, acting on a mind early trained to a sense of duty, and not previously tainted by the corruption of vice. Our Lord's pre-eminence thus belongs to his situation as the divinely authorized messenger of a perfect religious system; but his conduct and character illustrate the real effects of the principles which he communicated or enforced: and in proportion as we receive those principles in sincere faith, and habitually meditate upon and apply them, we must acquire more of his spirit, and approach nearer and nearer in our imitation of his excellence. He is not to be regarded by us as a pattern to be servilely copied, but as a living representation of the natural effects of piety, holiness, and sincere undoubting faith in things unseen, but infinitely important, working in an uncorrupted

human mind. It is by acquiring his principles, and so dwelling upon them, and feeling their truth, as for them to produce their natural effects, that we are to follow in his steps ; and if we really believe and feel what he came by divine authority to teach us, we cannot but be followers of him, though entirely unaided by any special or immediate influences.

There can be no doubt of the tendency of a belief in our possession of peculiar gifts to produce spiritual pride, a contempt of our brethren, and a very deceitful and pernicious confidence in the excellence of our own state ; and it is the greatest possible enemy to the serious and candid search after truth. It is in vain to urge upon him who imagines that he reads the Scriptures with Divine illumination, any arguments against his opinions. You may demonstrate that he is grossly perverting the true meaning of the sacred writers, and may bring their own clearest words against the doctrines he derives from them, but in vain ; you are reasoning against the spirit, and he only condemns you as an obstinate heretic. No man can take a single step towards the right understanding of his Bible, or has the remotest chance of improving his religious views by the study of it, until he has abandoned his presumptuous confidence in those prejudices which he fancies to be Divine light,

and applies himself with humility to impartial study, and the use of rational means. I know no obstacle so great to the progress of religious knowledge and truth, as a confidence in imaginary spiritual guidance, and, consequently, no error which it is more important vigorously to oppose.

I shall not stop to speak of the disgrace to religion which has often arisen from the degrading scenes of supposed spiritual influences among some sects. It will easily be understood to what sort of extravagances I allude, and I trust that they are very generally regarded with shame and disgust; but let me propose it for your candid consideration, whether such extravagances do not *naturally* and *fairly* arise out of the belief in Divine influences, as maintained by many who themselves apply the doctrine more soberly, and whether there is any justifiable ground for resisting the pretensions of the wildest enthusiasts, so long as we admit what many of our friends, whose piety is rational as well as sincere, and who only wish to serve the interests of pure religion, contend for as necessary. I myself can find no solid ground on which to rest, but in the denial of all mysterious, supernatural, or immediate influences, by whatever name they may be called. I deny, on the grounds already explained, that the expect-



tation of them is authorized by Scripture, fairly interpreted. I deny that any evidence is offered in their favour, which ought to satisfy any reflecting and inquiring man. I deny that any case is made out for their necessity or usefulness. It seems to me that religion consists in the working in our minds, according to the laws of our intellectual and moral nature, of those great principles of faith and love which, though true and incalculably important, could never have been so believed and felt as to be fully influential, if they had not been propounded with the authority of Divine Revelation. I cannot conceive how the principles themselves, really believed and felt, should fail to produce their effects: and I must think that religion is sadly degraded by those who will not trust to its own power and its own influences, but suppose extraordinary supplemental influences upon the mind to be indispensably required. I hope, and for myself I am persuaded, that there is nothing in the doctrine I have maintained to chill the ardour of piety, destroy the efficiency of prayer, or deprive us of the invaluable blessings of our holy faith, in seasons of peculiar need; on the contrary, I believe that it opens to us the truest and highest benefits of religion, and enables us to take the most reasonable and just views of the manner in which they are pro-

duced. With this conviction, I recommend the arguments I have used to your candid consideration, earnestly desiring that you may be able to discern the truth, and that you may fully feel the benefits which, when fully applied, it never fails to produce.



## CHRISTIAN FAITH.

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HEBREWS xi. 1.

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen.”

IN discoursing from these words, I propose, after some preliminary observations on the different applications of the term “*faith*” in the New Testament, to inquire in what sense it expresses a moral and Christian virtue, cautioning you against some common errors on the subject, which I apprehend lead to very serious evils, and then to dwell on its true nature and importance.

The proper meaning of the word *faith* is *belief* or *trust*, but, like other words which express abstract qualities, it is so limited and modified by the connection in which it occurs, that it is only by a careful attention to this that we can perceive its exact force in particular passages.

Among Christians the word soon came to signify more particularly a belief in the reality of the Divine mission, and miraculous powers of our Lord Jesus Christ, and a firm trust in the heavenly guidance and protection which he enjoyed.

In this manner we find it commonly used in the Gospels. Thus, for example, when the man sick of the palsy was let down through the roof into the house where Jesus was at Capernaum, the Evangelist relates that because he saw their *faith* (saw that they believed him to have power from above), he said unto the sick man, "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee!" which expressed, according to the Jewish idiom, that he was cured of his disease.

So when Jesus had rebuked the wind, and calmed the raging of the sea, he said to his terrified companions, "Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no *faith*?" Have you no confidence in God, who is able to protect us, and will not suffer those to perish whom he has chosen to fulfil the important purposes of his Providence?

And when Peter went to meet Jesus walking on the water, as long as he believed that by the same Divine assistance which was so remarkably afforded to his master he was able to do so, he did not sink; but when he saw the wind boisterous he was afraid, and he began to sink: immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, saying, "O thou of little *faith*, wherefore didst thou doubt?"

A frequent meaning of *faith* in the Epistles of Paul is *belief in Christianity*, and, particularly, trust in what it teaches as a means of obtaining

the favour of God, in opposition to a dependence on the *works*, that is, the rites and ceremonies of the Jewish law. In this sense, which is very common, and a careful attention to which is requisite for understanding many parts of the Epistles, it should be observed that *faith* includes and implies the necessity of practising the duties of Christianity as well as of believing its doctrines, and that it is never opposed to a belief in the importance of moral duties, but always to reliance upon the ceremonies of a ritual law. As examples, I may refer to Gal. ii. 16: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law, (i. e. most certainly, by the ceremonial observances of the Mosaic Ritual,) but by the *faith* (by *the religion*) of Jesus Christ." And Philipp. iii. 9: "That I may be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, (justification,) which is of the law, (which is founded on my conformity to the Mosaic ceremonial), but that which is through the *faith* (the religion) of Christ."

You are not ignorant how dreadfully such passages as these are perverted by understanding "works" and "the law" of the rules and acts of moral duty, and "faith" of the reception of a peculiar creed. The sense of the word now noticed should be particularly kept in view in reading the Epistle to the Romans. A remarkable example,



hardly differing from these, is found in Gal. iii. 23 : “Before faith came, (before the Gospel was given,) we were under the law, but after that faith is come we are no longer under a school-master.”

In the Epistle of James, *faith* is employed in a stricter sense, and with fewer accessory ideas, for belief in the truth of Christianity, and in the importance of what it prescribes ; the apostle declaring that *mere belief* can be of no use or advantage, if it do not lead to practice. “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works ? Can faith save him ? Wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead.” The second chapter of the Epistle of James is perfectly consistent with all St. Paul’s Epistles, properly understood and explained with a regard to the connection and peculiar phraseology, for the two apostles use the words *faith* and *works* in an entirely different sense ; but it can never be reconciled with the most common modern interpretation of those Epistles, nor with any system which teaches that good works are not essential for obtaining the Divine favour.

Other shades of difference in the meaning of the word faith, according to the various connections in which it occurs, might be pointed out ; but my

present purpose will be sufficiently answered, if I add an explanation of its force and design in our text. The beginning of the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews must be viewed in its relation to the preceding paragraph at the close of the tenth chapter. The writer, (x. 38,) quoting and applying to his purpose some words of the prophet Habakkuk, says, "Now the just shall live by faith;" rather, *he who is just by faith shall live*; "but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him; but we are not of those that draw back unto perdition, (destruction,) but of them that believe unto the saving of the soul (unto salvation)." He then goes on in the words of the text, to describe the nature of this saving faith. It is difficult to give any thing approaching the full force of the original in our language, without falling into long explanations. The force of the word rendered *substance* is such a firm persuasion, as gives as it were a present substantial existence to the things we hope for. The other word rendered *evidence* in our common version, means whatever produces strong conviction, and is put here for the effect produced by the strongest evidence. We will translate the text: "Now faith is a confidence in things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen," meaning things promised or foretold by God, but which

have not yet come to pass. Faith consists in having so firm and full a belief in the truth of God's promises, as always to act with a real regard to them.

The salvation of which the writer to the Hebrews is here particularly speaking is a temporal one, and the prophecies particularly referred to are those of our Lord, relating to the destruction of Jerusalem and the close of the Jewish dispensation. This I infer from the words almost immediately preceding: "Yet a little while, and he that shall come (he who is promised and expected) will come, and will not tarry," which according to the analogy of all similar expressions must be so explained. The design seems to be to prevent the Hebrew converts from falling away from their profession, through impatience and distrust respecting that awful event to which they were taught to look forward as the final confirmation of their religion, by urging upon them the duty of patience, and a confident belief in Divine promises, which were delivered to them with such abundance of evidence. What was to Christians of that time a subject of faith, has long since become a matter of history, but the quality which is here described and recommended is one which is equally required in all ages, since in this imperfect and transitory world men should always

look forward into futurity, and be influenced in their conduct by a regard to the assurances they have received respecting the Divine character, and to the revelations and promises of God respecting another state of being.

Let us, in the remainder of this discourse, consider the Christian virtue of Faith, as it ought to be cultivated by us—in what it consists, what its effects should be, and what are the means of acquiring it. We shall, at the same time, naturally be led to distinguish it from a sort of faith which often receives mistaken approbation, but which ought to be considered as at once degrading and pernicious—I mean the unresisting reception of what is imposed on us by human authority, without our pretending to understand its evidences, and whilst we refuse to give attention to what may be offered in opposition to them.

Mere belief being no more than the effect which evidence produces upon the mind, and not at all under the influence of the will, is not a moral quality, and cannot partake of the nature either of virtue or vice. The supposition of desire or determination in favour of one side of a controverted question, implies either a preference of error to truth, which is perfectly absurd, or a previous conviction in favour of that side to which we incline. If this conviction have reasonable grounds,

the prejudice is natural and useful, and stronger evidence on the opposite side will always be sure to overcome it; if it be no more than blind submission to the authority of erring fellow-mortals, who claim a right to direct our opinions, it is not entitled to a feather's weight in the balance, and is despised by every liberal and intelligent mind.

Where a man has used his best endeavours to obtain the truth, his involuntary errors cannot possibly be criminal; his inability to believe certain doctrines, if they be true, must doubtless be a disadvantage to him; but, be they true or false, it can never be made, by a just and merciful God, a ground of punishment against him. Neither, on the other hand, is it possible for belief *alone* to confer any advantage whatever—for, if the belief be well-founded, and yet do not influence a man's practice, it only renders him liable to the heavier condemnation; and if it be ill-founded, it is but a sign of his weakness or culpable inattention to the means of discovering truth. To bend the mind to the belief of dogmas against which the reason revolts, has been absurdly deemed meritorious. It is, in fact, the same thing as if we were to close our eyes against the light of heaven, or to wrap ourselves in darkness and obscurity, lest we should see and be led to admire the grandeur and beauty of the Creator's works.

The rational and enlightened mind judges correctly, according to the evidence which is placed before it. Ignorance and weakness are the parents of credulity. Vanity, self-conceit, and superficial knowledge, are the fruitful sources of scepticism. It is the duty of every man, diligently and humbly to employ the means of discovering truth—especially on the most important subjects, which may be placed within his power; but when he has done all, there can be no merit in his belief of any doctrine or opinion which his inquiries may lead him to adopt. It can be useful to him only by the pleasure which knowledge always affords, or by the influence it may be calculated to have over his conduct and affections; and if his mistakes could be made a ground of moral condemnation and punishment, wretched indeed would be the condition of human nature, since error is a part of the inheritance of man here below—the natural and necessary result of the imperfection of his powers and the narrowness of his views.

That this reasoning is fully as applicable to religious as to all other subjects, must appear evident, on the least consideration, for the truths of religion are not forced into our minds, or offered to us with an absolute assurance of their authority, but they claim our attention as having sufficient evidence, and they are to do us good only by being



received on reasonable conviction. He who from vanity and self-conceit refuses to examine the evidences of revelation, or pertly and contemptuously rejects it, because he dislikes what it commands and teaches, is certainly highly culpable. But we know it to be sometimes the case, that the sincere lover of truth is unable to satisfy his mind respecting it, or even acquires a strong opposing belief; and we ought to be aware that, however we may wonder and grieve, we have no right to condemn; that it would be absurd presumption in us to threaten future punishments, or to represent the want of what we hold to be a right belief, as rendering his virtues useless, and exposing him to the wrath of God.

There is no doubt apparent Scripture authority for the severe condemnation of those who resist a right belief, but it is always in cases where such resistance implies and includes moral corruption. Where pride, selfishness, and worldly-mindedness, rendered all evidence unavailing for the establishment of truth, and malice was carried to the extreme, of ascribing to an evil power the miracles which formed the only available proofs of Divine authority, condemnation from a teacher of holiness was absolutely called for; but that condemnation is misapprehended when it is interpreted, of eternal misery, since where punishments are threat-

ened against unbelievers, they will be found to be temporal.

The character which caused the great body of the Jews of our Lord's time to reject his religion, is one which, wherever it occurs, the moralist must severely condemn; but to argue from such condemnation for the guilt of involuntary error, is most inconsequential, and to identify the case of those who, in these times, conscientiously disbelieve our religion, with that of those whose characters are described and condemned in the Gospel history, would be most unreasonable and uncandid.

In respect to the many differences of opinion, some of them relating to matters of great importance, which exist amongst those who agree in recognizing the truth and Divine authority of revelation, may we not say, if *God* has not thought fit to make everything so clear that it will admit of no doubt, by what authority do *men* presume to condemn their brethren because they cannot see with *their* eyes, or judge with *their* understandings?—or with what degree of reason and justice can the errors of those who have sincerely desired, and, as far as their circumstances allowed, earnestly endeavoured to know the pure doctrines of the Gospel, be imputed to them as crimes, and made the ground of their condemna-

tion? No doubt truth is really important, and on its increased diffusion the improvement of human society greatly depends. There is every reason for endeavouring to acquire, and by fair and candid methods to diffuse it; but it is important by its influences and applications, like truth on all other subjects—there is no merit in admitting its evidences, nor criminality in inability to perceive or estimate them. When *faith* is used to signify mere belief, we may well ask, with St. James—“what doth it profit, my brethren, if any one say he hath faith, and hath not works? Can faith save him?” “Faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” We may be assured, that a mere belief of any doctrines or opinions, however true or important, can by no means contribute to our salvation; and that a readiness to believe, without sufficient evidence, is so far from being a virtue, that it is only a proof of ignorance, weakness, or indifference.

Very different is that faith which is recommended to us in Scripture, and which it is our duty, as Christians, to cultivate. Truly, it is described as “a confidence in things hoped for, a certain and constant conviction of things not seen.” It consists in bringing our belief in the perfections and providence of God, and in his promises relating to ourselves, from our reason to our conduct, and

so associating it with our feelings, that it shall be an ever-present and active principle in our minds.

We probably all *believe*, for the voice of universal nature proclaims it, and it is clearly declared in a revelation, which on satisfactory evidence we receive as of Divine authority, that God is a being most powerful, wise and good, and that he governs the whole universe, directing all events, providing for all his creatures with paternal care, and constantly promoting their truest happiness. But we may be fully satisfied respecting these truths, not even daring to admit the least doubt concerning them, and yet we may derive from them little or no advantage. Our faith must not be merely the assent of the understanding, it must also be the conviction of the heart. It must not be merely a speculative belief, which pleases in the hour of undisturbed reflection, but a glowing confidence producing contentment in every situation, enabling us to bear the severest trials of adversity and affliction with calm resignation, and leading us to seek amidst the darkest scenes the good which we are sure they are intended to produce, though the gloom may hide it from our feeble sight. We believe, on the authority of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that we are designed for another state of existence

after we leave the present world, and that our condition in it depends upon our conduct here. These great truths claim our regard on evidence of the most convincing kind, to which our reason yields its full assent; but this is not enough. Does our belief influence our minds so as to regulate our actions? Do we conduct ourselves as strangers and pilgrims upon earth, who seek for a better country, even an heavenly one? Does “a conviction of things not seen,” ever present to our hearts, strengthen us against temptation, preserve us from what is evil, and establish us in everything which is holy, virtuous, and good? These, my brethren, are the genuine effects of true Christian faith. Founded in reason, it disdains to accommodate itself to the wild fancies of ignorant enthusiasts, or to lend its support to absurdities, which may enjoy the patronage either of power or fashion; but, adapted to the nature and wants of man, it rises above a cold inanimate belief. It brings the feelings to the support of virtue and religion; it guides the conduct, and controls the actions; it gives a present existence to futurities, and almost raises the veil which conceals from mortal eyes the mysteries of Providence. It is a companion, a guide, a support amidst all the varying scenes of this uncertain world, directing us in the path we should follow, and showing its power

in the works we perform; heightening our joys, enabling us to sustain our afflictions, standing by us and encouraging us in that last struggle from which nature shrinks, and leaving us only when all its promises are accomplished, and we enjoy the full and clear perception of all which it taught us to anticipate.

A few words we will add respecting the proper means of acquiring and cultivating this animating and delightful faith. Although the conviction of the understanding be a thing which we cannot command, and for which we certainly have not been made accountable, yet the extent of the influence which, when attained, it has over the conduct, depends much upon our own moral state. If we are thoughtless and indifferent, we may chance to acquire the purest principles without their doing us much good. It matters little whether our opinions be true or false, if they are only to be subjects of speculation, not principles and rules of action; and it is abundantly certain, that such is the natural power of present and visible things over the human mind, that a mere belief founded in reason, in the most important truths respecting things distant and unseen, will produce little effect, unless they acquire something of the character and force of present things, by means of a well-cultivated faith. Such a faith is founded



on evidence; but it requires that the mind should frequently and earnestly dwell on the subjects to which it relates, so that they may become associated with the familiar trains of thought; that principles should be followed out into their consequences, and that there should be such an exercise of the imagination in realizing promised futurities, and forming a lively picture of what shall be, from the materials furnished by the present and the past, that it may have power to arrest our attention, and, aided by the superior real importance which our judgment must ascribe to it, may prevail over the seductive influence of what, for the present, assumes the aspect of pleasure. We should accustom ourselves to reflect on the great truths which are the subject of our faith, in connection, not so much with their evidences (with which, however, it is our duty to make ourselves well acquainted), as with their influences, and to consider their relations to our own condition and happiness. We should carefully observe those clear and visible displays of the Divine Providence and perfections, which illustrate and confirm our belief, and bring it in a manner home to our feelings, through the medium of the senses. We should endeavour to moderate the power which present things have over us, by a due consideration of the shortness and uncertainty of our tenure

upon earth, and the trifling importance of all worldly things, which at the best are so changeable, and have so much that is painful intermingled with them, compared with our condition hereafter. We should contemplate, with interest, the effects of a rational and lively faith upon others, especially considering, as our pattern and guide, the character of our Lord Jesus Christ, in which we see what human nature becomes under the habitual influence of this elevating principle; and we should fervently pray for the Divine blessing and assistance in acquiring it; for though it cannot be believed that the prayers of weak mortals can change the counsels of unerring wisdom, yet we are taught that this is an appointed means of obtaining spiritual blessings, and we know, by experience, that when sincere and fervent, it is always the greatest assistance in acquiring them.

We will leave it to the presumptuous sceptic to seek out all the pain, and suffering and vice that is in the world, and because his narrow view cannot penetrate the mysteries of Providence, or understand those plans which extend throughout eternity, daringly to pronounce that all is evil. We will leave it to the gloomy religious enthusiast, wrapped up in self, to imagine the eternal misery of millions of his fellow creatures, and to give

God glory for such a prospect. Be ours, my friends, that delightful confidence in the Divine perfections, which when the throne is enveloped in the darkest clouds, can with the eye of faith see the Supreme Ruler of all, from "seeming evil still educing good."

If others murmur at the perverseness of fate, or lament the fickleness of fortune, be ours that firm trust in Providence which will enable us to receive all events as the appointments of a father, and to apply ourselves humbly and cheerfully to improve his severest chastenings; if others will pursue the glittering baubles of this world, regardless of their future destination, be ours that lively conviction of things not seen, which will raise us above the vanities of this transitory life, and make us always act as for eternity. Be ours the faith that can anticipate those heavenly joys which excite our ardent hopes, and thence derive new resolution in our endeavours to attain them, and may it be ours at length to receive a bright reward, when faith shall be lost in sight, and hope swallowed up in enjoyment.

## MYSTERY IN RELIGION.

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DEUT. xxix. 29.

“ The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and unto our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

THESE words, drawn from one of the addresses of Moses to the Israelites, supply us with much important matter for reflection, and are well worthy to engage our serious thoughts, that we may exactly mark out the sentiment they convey, and apply it in such a manner as may be found profitable by all.

We must recollect, in the first place, that there *are* many things about which our curiosity may be excited, which, from the nature of our powers, must necessarily remain secret to us whilst we continue in this introductory state; nay, many things which we can hardly expect in any state to acquire capacities for fully comprehending. There are even subjects upon which we should be ready to pronounce it *important* for us to be well-informed, upon which we find ourselves involved in a darkness which all our ingenuity and researches fail to dissipate. In how many instances is the course of Provi-

dence different from what we should have prescribed, or what we can perceive to be wise and good ! How much is there in the common lot of humanity, in the history of the past affairs of our race, and in the existing circumstances of large portions of the human family, which we may strive in vain to bring into conformity with the rules which, in our opinion, must guide the Divine Governor, or to set in its proper place as part of a plan devised by Omniscience, and having its origin in infinite benevolence ! How much most desirable knowledge is there which has hitherto proved beyond the reach of our most eager efforts, and how often do uncertain glimpses of seemingly inaccessible truths, seen like the forms of natural objects in a mist, which magnifies, confuses, and renders them imposing, provoke whilst they baffle our most earnest and laborious inquiries ! It is the language of scepticism and irreligion, that, because we cannot understand and explain *all* things, we should in reason believe *nothing* of the agency of an unseen power. It is the opposite language of many injudicious friends of religion, that we must believe whatever is offered to us by constituted religious authorities, without presuming to call it in question, or pretending to apply to it the powers of our own minds, which are altogether inadequate to such subjects. Between these

extremes, each manifestly leading to most pernicious consequences, and both almost equally repugnant to our sober reason, we must endeavour to find a secure and satisfactory resting place. The proofs by which we are surrounded, of the existence and government of an infinitely powerful, wise, and good being, the Creator of all things, arising from what we do see and understand, are absolutely irresistible, and we surely know enough of the imperfection of our powers, the narrowness of our views, the shortness of our season for observation here, and the degree in which our attention is distracted from this more speculative subject by our wants and our pleasures, our follies, and, alas! too, by our vices, to make large allowances for what we must not expect here to understand, and humbly to believe that there may be, and must be, the same perfections exerted in what we are unable to explain, which we perceive and adore in innumerable instances occurring to us every day, and surrounding us on every side; nay, when we observe the advantages we derive from the mysteries of nature and Providence; how necessary they are to teach us humility, resignation, and piety; to make this world a proper place of preparation for another, and to give vigorous exercise to all our faculties, affording us a boundless course for progressive improvement,—



we cannot but acknowledge that our reason should acquiesce in its own disappointments, and that it is a lesson well becoming us to learn, that there are "*secret things belonging unto God,*" of which we have no right to require, and no reason to hope, any explanation, but which nevertheless afford not the slightest warrant for unbelieving doubts, or impious murmurs.

" Shall little, haughty ignorance pronounce  
His works unwise, of which the smallest part  
Exceeds the narrow vision of her mind ?  
As if upon a full-proportioned dome,  
On swelling columns heaved, the pride of art !  
A critic fly, whose feeble ray scarce spreads  
An inch around, with blind presumption bold,  
Should dare to tax the structure of the whole."

Do we, then, seem to recommend any approach towards a blind and uninquiring submission to the dogmas which it may suit any human teachers of religion to impose, and which they would pass upon us as having a Divine origin? Nothing can be further from my intention, or more abhorrent to my deepest convictions. Our reason was given us by God to be our guide, and if He have graciously seen fit in some things to assist its weakness, enabling it to overcome obstacles which would otherwise have stopped or retarded its advancement, it was his purpose to assist, not to discard or enslave it; and he has allowed us no means of safely dis-

pensing with its services. In fact, even supposing truth obtained, it could be of no advantage to us, unless embraced intellectually and applied rationally; and even if we have the unquestionable records of revelation open before us, we cannot tell what they really teach—we cannot detect the misinterpretations of ignorance, prejudice, and selfish interest, otherwise than by the use of our rational faculties; besides, although we should show the most absurd presumption in thinking it necessary that we should understand all the ways of Providence, or hesitating to believe and apply what is plain and credible, on account of that which may, at present, be incomprehensible by us, in the works or ways of the infinite God, there is no boundary fixed within which we are commanded to limit our inquiries. There are no doctrines or subjects pointed out as being forbidden to our searching thoughts. Whatever real knowledge we can obtain, is the honourable and delightful reward of our exertions in its pursuit; and if we make unavailing efforts, the lessons to be derived from these repulses, in our endeavours to extend the domains of human reason, are not uninstructional. Only let us approach sacred subjects with a seriousness becoming their high interest, and a respect which what we certainly know upon them should command. Let us esteem it more import-

ant to use well what has been freely given, or already securely acquired, than to attain to that knowledge which is still uncertain, or beyond our reach ; and, considering how much, notwithstanding any possible successes, must always surpass our powers, let us cherish feelings of humility becoming our nature. Then, no efforts made, by the use of means which he himself alone has put into our power, to extend our acquaintance with the works or plans of the Almighty, can be accounted blameable. There will be secrets enough always inscrutable by us ; but whatever we are able, by examining, to find out, it is right and good for us to know. All truth will be confirmed and rendered more clear in its relations to other branches of knowledge or duty, by further examination. Ultimately, at least, error only can be shaken ; and whilst we are disinterested, cautious, and diligent, we need never fear evil consequences from directing to any subject the best powers of our minds, or applying to any doctrines the tests which seem best calculated to try their purity and value.

A secret or mystery is, by its very definition, that which remains unknown to us ; and, surely, *whatever* there may be in the Divine counsels which remains concealed from us, it becomes such insignificant creatures as we are, humbly to ac-

knowledge and contentedly to bear our ignorance, believing, that what is by us incomprehensible, or apparently evil, is, nevertheless, really glorious and good; but if we are so happy as, by any means, to attain to the knowledge of what before was hidden from us, it can no longer be a mystery. A doctrine or truth, whether revealed or established by convincing arguments, cannot be a mystery. It is now given up as the dominion of our reason. It becomes now, not only allowable but right for us to examine and consider it in every point of view—to study both its evidence and its application, by every aid which we can bring to bear upon the subject; and if it will not bear examination, we may be sure there is some mistake—it cannot be the truth we have been led to suppose it. It is vain to tell us that what is revealed may be true and essential, yet incomprehensible, for the only possible benefit to us of any doctrine, is its influence on our minds and characters, which arises from our understanding it, and what we do not understand can do us no service—*cannot*, therefore, be essential to us. There may be truths, highly important and useful, which are not *entirely* within the scope of our comprehension; but then, it will be found that the benefit arises from what we understand, and that the rest, though passing what the nature of our own powers allows us to

have any knowledge of, by no means contradicts our conception of what may belong to an infinitely superior being. Thus, to take as an example the omnipresence of God—we can very well understand the truth that *our* thoughts, words, and actions, and those of all his creatures wheresoever situated, are all naked and fully known to him: and this, consequently, we can practically apply. We cannot understand what must be the essential nature of a being who is at once present in every place, but we can conceive that such an attribute may belong to the being by whom all creatures exist and are supported, and that our own limitation to a single spot prevents the possibility of our knowing *how* he exists who is everywhere. There is mystery attending the truth, yet it is itself understood, sanctioned by reason, and perceived to have a relation to our conduct. But suppose a doctrine propounded, the very terms of which are incapable of any consistent explanation; which either teaches *nothing*—that is, consists of a mere form of words, conveying no distinct ideas to the mind, or teaches a contradiction, which no natural evidence can confirm, and which can be established only on the degradation of the reasoning faculty. As such a doctrine cannot be understood, it cannot be really believed; men may believe that such a form of words was commanded

to be pronounced, and that its truth, in some sense, is not to be called in question; but the mind embraces no truth, and, therefore, no good influence is produced. There is, in fact, no revelation made, but that the use of certain prescribed words is essential—and there surely is no man, pretending to reason, who will not feel repugnance to believing that God would make such a revelation. Such a doctrine may be called a mystery, but the very name acknowledges its inutility. “The secret things belong unto God.” Until they are explained, and rendered intelligible, they come not into use for us. We may repeat the prescribed words, but still they remain altogether ineffectual and uninteresting. One thing, however, is no mystery. It is fully competent to us to inquire whether such a dogma as we have supposed ever was prescribed by Divine authority. This is a matter of reason and evidence, and the improbability of the supposition that God would impose upon us what we cannot understand or use, will justly have no small influence in inclining us to the negative. This supposed case illustrates that of all mysteries in religion. They may have charms for the credulous and feeble-minded; they may even captivate men of great powers, by the sort of sacrifice they require, but they can be of no use as articles of faith; and the presumption is



always exceedingly strong against their being really founded on any Divine authority. In our text, *secret things*, or mysteries, are clearly opposed to those things which are revealed, so that what is revealed can no longer be a mystery. We are taught, that what we cannot know or explain—what remains a mystery, belonging to God, is to be treated by us with reverence on that account, and we are not to imagine we have a right to penetrate it, or to assume the liberty of condemning what we do not understand. With these secret things we have little to do, and shall be called to no account respecting them—“but those things which are revealed belong unto us and unto our children for ever, that we may do all the words” of the Divine law. Hence, we see what it is, in religion, which should be our concern—that part which is comprehensible and practically applicable.

What God has given us faculties sufficient for establishing and perceiving, or what he has himself so communicated that we can embrace it with our minds, can perceive its tendency, and follow it up in our practice, that it is, and that only which is for us, and should be handed down to our children; in that our religion should be considered as consisting, and to the improvement of our acquaintance with it should our best thoughts be

directed. Revelation means the making known what before was concealed: its very essence is to be without mystery, and where that word is introduced into it, we immediately suspect something wrong, some ignorant if not fraudulent perversion. Revelation allies itself to reason and seeks its support. It offers its doctrines as well as its evidences to be examined and tried by every fair application of the powers of the mind. It seeks no blind submission, no prostration of the understanding, but an intellectual and therefore a living and active faith. The doctrines which belong to us and to our children for ever—to what do they belong? certainly to our minds, to our understandings as well as our affections, to our judgments which should approve, as well as to our hearts which should cherish them.

We have only further to consider the great reason why the things which are revealed were given unto us; “that we may *do* all the words of the law;” that we may bring all that we believe into practice; that we may make every sacred truth contribute to purify our hearts, to check our vicious propensities, and restrain our unholy desires; to bind us by stronger ties to our brethren, and excite us to greater exertions and sacrifices in their service; to enliven our love to God, and increase our resignation to his appointments; to

render us his faithful, confiding, and obedient servants; and to make our sojourn in this world of trial an effectual preparation for our admission into a heavenly state of glory and felicity. Such are the fruits by which we are to recognize a genuine faith, and without which we cannot believe it to exist. Where they are not found in some considerable quantity, we are not to value the tree for a vain outward resemblance to that which bears the desired produce. What availeth even truth, if it be not so believed, reflected upon, and pursued into its consequences, as to produce genuine influences on the heart and life? And if there be truth enough to produce these influences (for it is only truth which produces what is good), who are we that we should despise it on account of any errors with which it may, in our opinion, be united? Our business is to profit ourselves by the truths of religion, and to make them as profitable as we can to others; and to this end we should ever bear in mind the purpose for which they were given, not merely or chiefly to be believed, but to be brought into practice. We are not afraid of their candid and serious discussion, because what is true must be strengthened and purified from any remains of error, by the fair and just application of reason in its examination; and what is revealed is given to us and to our children,

that we may examine and consider in order to apply it; but we will never forget that the essential part is the practical part; that for the sake of this our religion was given; that on account of this it is worth examining, and that in reference to this only our attainments will finally be tried. "The secret things belong unto God." There are many things which it concerns us not to know; of which it is good for us here to be ignorant; and however great may be the triumphs of reason and philosophy, there must still always be a boundary of mystery to exercise the faith and humility of our weak and dependent race. It is folly in us to require any more knowledge than we possess as the condition of our religious faith. Much of ignorance and doubt belongs to our nature, and we have the clearest and most positive proofs of all that it is really most needful for us to know. Let us then, even whilst we cautiously and humbly inquire and speculate on interesting but difficult subjects, be content with the imperfection of our views, and rest our minds on the distinct parts of the prospect. "The secret things belong to God," and cannot be essential to us. On those which are revealed we may expatiate with constant pleasure and improvement, applying ourselves to understand all their bearings, that we may faithfully transmit and fully obey them.



## PAUL'S PREACHING BEFORE FELIX.

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ACTS xxiv. 25.

“ And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time ; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.”

FELIX was the procurator or governor of Judea, under the Roman emperor Claudius. He was a freed-man, or one who had been a slave, but had received his freedom by his master's favour. He had been the property of the mother of Claudius, and was retained in the service of this emperor, in whose favour his brother Pallas stood very high. He is described by the historian Tacitus as having exercised his power with all manner of cruelty and lust,—and we learn from Josephus that he seduced his wife Drusilla (whom he probably married during Paul's imprisonment, perhaps immediately previous to the interview described in the text) to desert her first husband. Notwithstanding his attempt to conciliate the favour of the Jews when leaving them, by the injustice of suffering Paul, whom he knew to be guilty of no crime, to remain a prisoner, his government had been so hateful, that he was soon after his recall followed to Rome



by many leading Jews, by whom he was accused before Nero, who by this time had succeeded to the empire, and would probably have suffered the reward of his crimes, had it not been for the powerful interference of his brother Pallas, who still retained his influence at the imperial court. From this sketch of his history we see how much cause Felix had to tremble, when he heard the apostle discourse *concerning righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come*. Let us imagine this corrupt and wicked man, proud of his power and thoughtless in hardened depravity, in order to satisfy a vain curiosity which had been excited during the trial, or to gratify his bride Drusilla, who as a Jewess might feel some interest in the contests of Jewish sects, calling the holy apostle to speak before him in private concerning the faith of Christ. He expected probably to be entertained with speculations applied to no practical purpose, and theoretic discussions like those of the Greek philosophers, on the doctrine of a future state, for maintaining which Paul had on his trial stated that he was persecuted. He sought amusement from his prisoner, but he little anticipated the freedom of even implied reproof. What must have been his astonishment when the eloquent advocate of our heavenly religion, armed with the boldness which truth inspires, and regardless of

his own dependent situation, set before him the great moral and practical truths of the Gospel, in such a powerful and convincing manner as forced upon his troubled memory the recollection of his own crimes, and made him for the first time fully feel their misery, and dread their consequences. The imprisoned apostle preaches, and the powerful wicked man trembles at the word of one whose life is at his disposal; shrinks from the eye of one whom his nod appoints for freedom or for bondage. Such is the power of virtue and of truth; the seared conscience is restored to momentary feeling; it is aroused for an instant from a long and deep sleep, and *almost* he was persuaded to repent of his sins, and embrace that holy faith whose new creating power might, even for him, have reformed the heart and changed the character. Could he even then have listened with patience, whilst he trembled under the first impressions of Divine truth; could he have suffered his mind then to dwell on the reasoning which he had heard, and resisted the suggestions of pride and worldly-mindedness, he might have been turned from his evil course, and have found peace, where the humble and sincere penitent may always find it, at the feet of the blessed Jesus. But such was not his happy lot. We are most seriously warned in various parts of Scripture, against the danger

of indulging vicious habits, and the extreme difficulty of long-deferred repentance; and the case of this unhappy man, who was convinced, and trembled, yet could not change, should be considered by us as a monitory example. "Who-soever committeth sin is *the slave* of sin." "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil." Too much humbled and shamed to treat his prisoner with indignity, and perhaps deceiving himself with the hope of yet profiting by his advice, though he had not firmness immediately to apply it, Felix dismissed the apostle from his presence: "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will send for thee." Often, again, he heard him, and could not help hearing him with interest; but the decisive moment was past—sin had triumphed, the heart was irrecoverably hardened, and he could even seek the presence of the teacher of righteousness, in the hope of being bribed to do him justice. Disappointed in this hope, he descended to the meanness of gratifying the hatred of the Jews, by leaving the apostle a prisoner for his successor, and vainly sought, by this new crime, to stifle the accusing cry, with which he doubted not an injured people would follow him to the presence of his sovereign.

In reflecting on Paul's preaching before Felix, we cannot but be struck with the mighty power which pure principles, uttered with earnest sincerity, are capable of exercising over even the most abandoned characters—checking, for a moment, their career of crime, commanding involuntary respect, and even exciting a feeling, however transient, of horror at their own wickedness; at the same time, this wretched governor awfully proves that men may be too far gone in vice to be capable of being recalled by the most powerful means, and put us upon our guard against the dangerous self-delusion of delaying to a more favourable season, which will never arrive, the repentance of any evil or the acquisition of any good which we know to be needful for us. Our daily strengthening habits soon acquire a force which is beyond the power of ordinary motives to break, and it is ridiculous for us to calculate on *future* repentance, if even now we are not sufficiently sensible of its necessity to attempt it *immediately*. How rare are the instances in which the hardened and long practised sinner is brought to a proper sense of his situation, and impressed with that godly sorrow which leads to amendment and newness of life! With what force and novelty must the arguments strike his mind, which can change the character of his thoughts, break through established associations, and reverse old practices!

It is seldom that any thing less than severe suffering can effect such a change, and then the profession extorted by fear cannot be depended upon, unless proved to be sincere by the subsequent conduct, so that a death-bed repentance cannot afford any reasonable and solid ground for confidence. It is easy enough in the hour of suffering and in the approach of death, to extort from the sinner a confession of faith, and he will eagerly seize on the hope he may be encouraged to build upon it; but this is not Christian conversion, and it cannot, on Gospel principles, or the authority of Scripture, be considered as effectual or advantageous. If even the great apostle failed in his benevolent efforts to convert a hardened and abandoned sinner, those who endeavour to tread in his steps, but at a very humble distance, need not wonder that their labours are often apparently in vain, and instead of weakly desiring the power to alter the constitution of man, they will humbly pursue their appointed path, happy if sometimes they have the opportunity of recalling those who have not yet strayed too far from the right path—if they can encourage and assist the well-disposed, strengthen the tempted, and train up the young in those principles which will secure them from the need of a future bitter repentance. It is a sort of quackery in religion,



which can be productive of no good, though it may often occasion much serious mischief, to offer a certain cure in cases which the wisest and the best—the true physicians of the soul—have considered as beyond their reach, and which rarely admit of any benefit from rational and well-founded methods of treatment. There are those who will offer salvation as a thing easily attainable to the most abandoned sinners, and will even go so far as to assert, that the blacker their crimes, the fitter they are to come to Christ, to be cleansed by him. It may almost serve to expose the imposture, that such persons usually represent their own specific as the only efficacious one, and found the infallible merit of the faith they teach, in the condemnation of all their brethren.

But, though I esteem it necessary to reprehend prevailing modern opinions and practice on the subject of conversion, I would not unnecessarily magnify the difficulty which attends the reclaiming of the most hardened sinner. Undoubtedly, there may have been, nay, there must have been, many as bad, or even worse, than Felix, who were converted by the preaching of our Lord himself, and of the apostles, and first teachers of the Gospel, and who were completely brought under the influence of the holy truths they embraced. This is rationally accounted for from the consideration, that



such persons had previously had no opportunities of acquiring just principles of religion; and that the truths they received coming fresh into their minds, effected a complete change in the system of their feelings and motives, which can hardly be supposed in those who have been brought up Christians, and have neglected what they had heard and known: to this may be added, the effect of miraculous powers, and the extraordinary energy belonging to a newly-introduced and persecuted system. Still too, by taking advantage of the events of Providence, by forcible representations of the opposite effects of different courses of conduct, by powerful appeals to the better feelings of our nature, and to a well-founded fear of Divine wrath against obstinate guilt, and by presenting striking views of corrupted or misunderstood truths, deep and lasting impressions may be made on sinners, and Christian benevolence should never suffer us to despair of bringing back a lost brother. Only it is a truth which requires serious consideration, that conversion is not so easy a thing as it is oftentimes made to appear, that there are notions widely prevalent which lead to much and most injurious deception respecting it, and that there are many circumstances which can make even apostolic eloquence vain on a hardened sinner.

But let us pass from these reflections to another

view of our text, which is highly interesting and important, namely, as it shows the true nature of the Christian religion, and the proper mode of advancing it. Paul "*reasoned*" with Felix "of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come." We cannot but be struck with the very wide difference that there is between this, and the method adopted by those modern teachers, who are esteemed, or who wish to be esteemed, the most successful and the most *evangelical*. Instead of employing reason as the means of conviction, their general practice is to condemn its use, and to promote a tumult of the passions, which shall silence its voice. Reasoning on religious subjects they proscribe as cold and useless, and it is in general in defiance of the judgment that they endeavour to awaken enthusiasm or to impose implicit faith. And with respect to the subjects of their preaching, the first place is certainly by no means given to those apostolic ones of "righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come;" but on the contrary, these are too often passed in comparative neglect, or treated as insignificant, whilst the prominent position is occupied by the necessity of a peculiar faith, which can of itself supply all deficiencies, but without which righteousness, and temperance, and serious regard to future judgment, are odious in the sight of God, and partake of the nature of

sin. The modern self-called evangelical preacher, instead of *reasoning* with the sinner on the topics noticed in our text, examines into his creed, requires his undoubting belief of incomprehensible, not to say absurd doctrines, and exhorts him to rely on the *merits* of a Saviour, instead of applying the precepts and examples of his great deliverer from the power of sin, in the regulation of his own conduct. Such a preacher probably builds his doctrines more especially on the writings—I should say on *his* interpretation of the writings; for that they are differently understood by equally honest and not less competent judges, is but one of the facts of the case—of the very apostle of whom we are speaking. It may be asked him whether he compares the writings with the conduct of Paul, or whether he finds a consistency between the manner in which “the prisoner of the Lord” is reported to have preached to the wicked governor of Judea, and the doctrine respecting the remedy of sin, which *he* advances as found in the same person’s letters to his converts.

If there be such consistency, it is not very obvious to common eyes; it is at least certain that the account we have of Paul’s address to the sinner is very unlike the attempts at conversion by those who imagine that they most closely follow his doctrine in the present day.

As the apostle was expressly sent for to Felix

to *discourse concerning the faith of Christ*, it is no more than a just conclusion that his discourse contained the essentials of Christianity ; yet there can be no doubt but that Luke has given us a faithful abstract of it, and he plainly states that its subjects were "righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come,"—words which include all our personal and social duties, as well as the grand sanction by which Christianity enforces our attention to them. Here then we have the substance of religion, the true and only means of securing the Divine favour, and the refutation of all other and deceitful pretences on the subject. The religion of Jesus we are assured consists in a due sense of our being in the presence and power of God, and having all to be judged by him according to our actions, and in a regard to the relative and individual virtues which he prescribes, in treating our fellow creatures with justice, kindness and charity, in controlling our own passions, and so constantly regulating them by reason and piety, as to live in sobriety, chastity, and temperance all our appointed time. Vain and worthless is the religion which does not lead to these results ; unsound are the doctrines which do not promote them, and empty is the show of piety which is not connected with them. It is only by preaching "of righteousness, and temperance, and judgment to come," that the sinner can be really converted

and the good man strengthened. It is only by a practical application of them that we can adorn the doctrine of our Saviour, and become, amidst our frailty, fit subjects for that Divine mercy which is promised to those "who by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory, honour, and immortality." Endeavour, my fellow Christians, to acquire those pure, holy, and sublime views, which, as they were unfolded by the great apostle, made Felix tremble, and awakened fear and remorse in his hardened mind. Seek them in the discourses and actions of your Master and his chosen followers. Let your faith in Christ lead you to a Christian life, and you will have the best of all proofs of its being what it ought to be, and need feel no alarm for its alleged deficiencies. Learn your duty and practise it, and you may be sure you will want no conversion. You cannot understand every thing in the writings of the New Testament, but take those plain descriptions of the nature and purpose of the Gospel which you cannot misunderstand; let them be your guides, and admit not the possibility of that being necessary which is doubtful or incomprehensible. Think well *on righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come*, and steadily apply your convictions, and you cannot but attain to peace and joy here, and eternal blessedness in a better state.

In conclusion, let me once again warn you, my



brethren, against the fatal error of *putting off to a more convenient season* the performance of your duties, or the reformation of your faults. *Felix trembled*; his conscience was roused, his heart was softened, his conduct began to appear to him in its true light, and he might have been brought to effectual repentance, but he could not bear *immediately* to give up his long-cherished sins; he must think of it again; he would further hear the apostle, but it must be *at a more convenient season*. The important hour was gone by, and instead of leading to his conversion, his intercourse with the apostle only involved him in further criminality. You will all find it the same if you imitate his conduct. The season will never come when you can sacrifice your vices without pain, and every delay will lessen your disposition to attend to them. *Now* then listen to the voice of conscience and the exhortations of religion; call to mind the all-powerful motives to goodness which the Gospel presents; consider its awful warnings, and *tremble* at its denunciations against obstinate, unrepented sin. Use all the means of grace for strengthening the influence of religion, and begin this day to conquer your sins; "for now is the accepted time; now is the day of salvation."





## THE CHRISTIAN EVIDENCE FOR A LIFE TO COME.

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JOHN xiv. 19.

“ Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more ; but ye see me : because I live, ye shall live also.”

It can admit of no doubt, that the time here spoken of by our Lord, when the world should see him no more, is after his death ; and if it be inquired how he could assert that his disciples should then continue to see him, a little attention to the connection of his words, and to the similar expressions which he employs where his meaning cannot be doubtful, will enable us to reply with great confidence, that the communications they received from him after his ascension, and the extraordinary gifts which he was then enabled to bestow upon them according to his promise, are thus described in the figurative language of his discourse. In answer to a question put to him by one of the apostles, “ Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself to us, and not unto the world ? ” he says, “ If a man love me he will keep my words, and my father will love him, and *we will come unto him,*

*and make our abode with him;*" i. e. no doubt, in the gifts of the spirit instructing, directing, and assisting him. And again: "A little while, and ye shall not see me;" i. e. when I die—"again, a little while, and ye shall see me," (in the gifts of the spirit,) "because I go to the Father." "Ye now have sorrow, but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man can take from you." In all these passages our Lord plainly speaks of coming to, and being *seen by*, his disciples in the gifts of the spirit, and the intercourse he held with them after his ascension; they therefore lead us to the true and satisfactory explanation of our text. "The world shall see me no more, but ye shall see me: because I live, ye shall live also." My resurrection, and your certain knowledge of my living in another state, shall be to you the proof and assurance of your own future and immortal existence. Such was our Lord's reasoning for the encouragement and consolation of his faithful friends. He assures them that after his removal from this world, they should have such certain and repeated proofs of his continued existence, they should hold such direct intercourse with him, and have such unquestionable sensible signs of his affording them the promised aids in their labours and trials, that they might be said again to see him, and have

him with them; and he holds out to them *his* continued existence after death in an unseen state, as a proof and example of their own, which should remove all doubt from their minds, inspire them with the strongest confidence, and afford them abundant support and consolation amidst the difficulties and sufferings which they would be called upon to endure.

I am led by the consideration of the text, as I have now explained it, to offer to you on the present occasion a few reflections on the simplicity of the Gospel evidence for a future state, and to attempt directing your attention to the circumstances in which its importance principally consists.

It is my first observation, that the evidence afforded us by the Gospel on this most interesting of all subjects, consists almost entirely in *fact*. Jesus died and rose again. He left this world, and after his departure he manifested himself to his disciples, and fulfilled promises which he had made to them whilst he was with them. Our Lord did not, as it seems to me, remarkably distinguish himself as a *preacher* of the doctrine of a future state. It is not introduced in many of his discourses to the people, and it is very rarely that we find him arguing in its defence; indeed, the only instance of this kind which I can recollect,

is where he reasons from God being called the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, because he is not a God of the dead but of the living—an argument which admirably served his immediate purpose of silencing the Sadducees, and which might, when viewed in the proper light, have considerable weight with reflecting persons, but which by no means appears to us the strongest which could have been brought forward, or the one which would have been selected, at least *alone*, had it been the intention of Jesus to rest the determination of the question on abstract reasoning. If, as I am fully persuaded, the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew be wrongly applied to a day of general judgment in another state, our Lord's own words furnish us with no description of any thing in our future condition; for in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, he merely employed prevailing Jewish opinions for the scenery and incidents of a story, the doctrine or moral of which is all contained in the few last words.

The doctrine of another life was speculatively maintained by the Pharisees, and by most of the learned Jews after the Babylonish captivity, but their notions concerning it were very confused and erroneous, and we may well conjecture that the arguments by which they supported it, of which we

know nothing, were inconclusive and unsatisfactory. Our Lord unobtrusively joined himself to the believers in the general truth; but it does not seem to have been among the objects of his *personal* ministry, because it could not have been usefully effected by such means, to diffuse it among the people, and he seems to have announced it on his own authority, in comparatively few discourses, and those chiefly addressed to his chosen disciples and immediate friends; as that recorded in the sixth chapter of John, that at the grave of Lazarus, and in the impressive words of our text, taken from his farewell conversation with his apostles. There is much more on this subject in the Gospel of John, which contains most of the private conversations of Jesus, than in the writings of any other of the evangelists, though it is possible that several passages in that Gospel may be wrongly applied to it.

If Jesus had not, before his death, announced the doctrine of a future retributory scene, with sufficient plainness, to those who were to be the teachers and messengers of his religion, the evidence arising from his resurrection and ascension, although in itself satisfactory, would have been too much left to be discovered and applied by human reason to have been very useful: but if we only know that he made the doctrine of a future



existence a part of his instructions to his followers, and especially that he appealed, for its fullest proof, to the example which would be afforded in himself, we cannot easily overlook or misapply the evidence, which is presented to us in the fullest, plainest, and most forcible manner possible.

After our Saviour's ascension, the very circumstance of the intercourse they held with the unseen state, directed the minds of the disciples so strongly to it, and their hopes were so ardently fixed upon it, amidst the labours and persecutions they were enduring, as the scene of rest and reward, that the mention of it could not fail continually to occur in their writings, and the fact of the resurrection, so vastly important, both with relation to the general truth of their religion, and to this grand doctrine in particular, is accordingly brought before the view in every possible manner. There may, however, be differences of opinion respecting the right mode of considering various passages in the epistles, relating to the future state, and respecting the inferences which ought to be drawn from them; so that, whilst we observe with satisfaction, how the grand and all-important general truth impressed the apostles and first disciples; whilst we occasionally adopt, with triumphant feeling, their language as the *expression* of our own

faith, and use every endeavour to understand their ideas, and trace them to their sources, we shall do well to take, as the solid ground-work of our conviction, not the assertions or reasonings of any man, even of those who were favoured with immediate and extraordinary communications, but the plain evidence of facts, which seems hardly capable of misapprehension or perversion. It is on this account that I judge it so peculiarly important that we should, all of us, be enabled to appreciate the full value of this evidence of fact, in favour of the Christian doctrine of a future life, which will, I doubt not, be found, on examination, the most decisive that could possibly be afforded, so that it is little to say of it, that it is amply sufficient to satisfy any reasonable being.

There is yet another view, in which the nature of the evidence, as being chiefly that of fact, deserves our particular attention. It is well known, that very different opinions respecting the state of the dead have actually been derived, by Christians, from the language of Scripture, and this language, perhaps, hardly could have been so clear as not to have become ambiguous from the lapse of time, and the changes of circumstances. Some maintain, that the soul remains, from death till the general resurrection, in an intermediate state of conscious existence; others are fully persuaded

that the human being remains unconscious in death, till roused from its sleep by the general call of the last day ; and there are some who deny that the doctrine of a general judgment is fairly drawn from Scripture, properly interpreted, and believe that each individual passes, on death, into the state of happiness or suffering allotted to him, according as his conduct has deserved. All of these opinions profess to be derived from the language of the New Testament, and there is not one of them which has not been adopted by learned, able, and candid expositors ; nor is it by any means easy to come to a satisfactory decision amongst them : yet do the difference and the doubt by no means affect, as might at first be apprehended, the certainty of the doctrine of a future life, because this certainty rests upon no language which is liable to be misunderstood, but upon facts which are established by the best possible evidence, and which, if once admitted, leave no doubt upon the subject. However, therefore, we may differ one from another, concerning the precise period and mode of our admission to that existence which is to follow death, we must all concur respecting its reality, and ought to agree in endeavouring, more and more, to apply our faith to practical use, and to increase its influence over our conduct and feelings.

Our time will not allow me, on the present occasion, to enter upon the *evidence* of the facts, that Jesus died upon the cross, and upon the third day rose again from the dead. It is much to be desired that we should all of us believe these things, not in consequence merely of the influence of education and prejudice, but in consequence of having impartially examined the subject, and formed a just estimate of the force of the proofs afforded. My present object is rather to point out in what manner these facts should be regarded by us, as proofs of our own future existence, and to place for you in the light which appears to me most striking, the certainty and clearness of the conclusion.

Before his death, Jesus, whilst he foretold that event, promised his disciples miraculous guidance, instruction, and assistance, in the execution of their important mission. Whilst present with them, he communicated to them limited powers; but he told them that "it was expedient for them that he should go away," because it was only when he should have ascended to the Father, that he would be enabled to afford them all the aids which they required.—"If I go not away, the Comforter" (better the *Instructor*) "will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you."

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead, in

itself alone did no more than had been done by the raising of Lazarus, the widow's son, and the daughter of Jairus. It was a practical illustration of the power to restore life of the being who gave and who supports it, a power which could only be doubted because we do not see it exercised. Had he, like those whom his word recalled to life, continued subject to the power of death, the grand object would not have been answered. But he rose from the grave *immortal*, having for ever vanquished the power of death, and after having shown himself alive by many infallible proofs, ascended to his father and his God, prepared to enter without further change on another state of existence.

How often has it been the earnest wish of those whose minds have been agitated by doubt respecting futurity, that some departed friend might be permitted again to revisit this world, to remove their uncertainty and establish their faith ! How often even have those who cherish a firm belief in the glorious doctrine of the Gospel, felt this natural wish arising in their minds, especially in moments of bereavement and sorrow ! Now what a wise Providence does not see fit to grant to individuals was afforded to the first disciples of Christ, and through them to Christians in every age, and forms a very important part of the

evidence which we are now considering. We have noticed the promises made by our Lord before his death, of procuring for them certain gifts, and being present with them in certain influences and manifestations.

The fulfilment of these promises was the best possible proof of his actual existence in another state. It was a proof liable to no objection. A few individuals were not deceived through enthusiasm, for it was extended to the whole body of the disciples. The workings of imagination were not mistaken for extraordinary influences, for they were continued for years, and were shown by outward signs which were witnessed and examined by enemies as well as friends. And is there one thing more which we desire that the evidence may be perfect? Do we wish to know the effect produced on the minds of those who received such extraordinary proof? To observe what signs they gave of believing in that world beyond the grave, with which they held such peculiar intercourse? Here also we are fully satisfied. So zealous were they in the service of their exalted Lord; so completely were their minds occupied by the glories of that heavenly rest to which *they* looked with undoubting confidence, that we find them sacrificing every worldly good, enduring and even welcoming every suffering; counting themselves



happy that they were found worthy to suffer for the sake of their religion, and whilst they promoted it with unwearied activity, thinking its promised rewards an abundant compensation for every worldly loss and affliction. Are these then indeed the same men of whose timidity, distrust, contests for power and desire of vengeance against those who would not receive them, we read before their Master's death, when they were still, notwithstanding all his instructions, looking forward to a temporal kingdom and anticipating the possession of worldly power and greatness, as the rewards of their adherence to him whom they acknowledged as the Messiah that was to come? What can be more striking than the contrast between their conduct and state of mind then, and after his ascension, when they had received the promised gifts of the spirit? And to what should we attribute the change, but to the impression made upon their minds by the very evidence we are now examining, which completely turned their views and expectations from a temporal to a heavenly and eternal kingdom?

So strong are the natural arguments in favour of a future state, from the character and perfections of God, and the nature of the human mind, that they cannot but influence the philosophic thinker; but it must be acknowledged that

they are not absolutely *convincing*, partly perhaps because it is a subject of such awful interest that we require the fullest evidence, more especially as the season of affliction, when belief is most useful and necessary to us, is naturally most of all the season of doubt. But what can we imagine, or wish for, more clear than the simple facts set before us in the Gospel?

The best reasonings would affect different minds differently, and the most intelligible would be too refined for universal influence; but facts afford an evidence clear, simple, and irresistible, which all can appreciate, and which equally satisfies the wise and the ignorant.

A man as to his nature in all things like unto his brethren, only exalted above them by the proofs he afforded of immediate intercourse with God, and of possessing power from him, professing to believe in a future state, and teaching it to his friends and disciples as a most important doctrine, predicts his own resurrection from the grave, and promises after leaving this world to afford manifest proofs to them of his existence in another state, and even to hold such intercourse with them as they could not mistake. He accomplishes his predictions and fulfils his promises. The character of his disciples in consequence changes, and their entire disregard and willing sacrifice of all earthly

good, proves their immoveable conviction that they should live again in a better and happier state, where they should be abundantly rewarded for their labours and their sufferings.

I can find no way of considering this evidence which should not strengthen our conviction, and with such evidence I can think of nothing more as wanting. We may differ in various particulars respecting the interpretation of expressions used by the apostles respecting this future state; nay, we might suppose ourselves altogether deprived of their writings. Yet whilst we retain the historical books of the New Testament, and pay any regard to the well-established rules of evidence, our certainty respecting the great doctrine of the Gospel must remain unchanged. We must rejoice in the immoveable conviction that "because Jesus our Lord was dead and now liveth, so we shall live also."

Such being the essential and intimate connection between our hope of immortality, and the resurrection of our Saviour, can we ever think of that event without feelings of joy and triumph in the high destiny which the merciful goodness of God has appointed for our race; of lively gratitude to the great Source of all good, for that which is the crowning gift of all his blessings here, with which, trusting to his mercy, death ceases to be

terrible to us, and delightful hopes enliven the pleasures and sooth the sorrows of our pilgrimage ; and of warm affection for our elder brother, our leader to immortal life, who has achieved the victory over death, and has been exalted to God's right hand in heaven, that by his living we may assuredly know that we are to live also? And finally, my brethren, having this hope, let us ever consider "what manner of persons we ought to be in all holy conversation and godliness." Let us live under a constant expectation of, and in a constant preparation for, a day of retribution. Let our conduct prove that we desire for ourselves, and for our brethren, something better than time and sense alone can afford ; let us learn, so long as we humbly desire and endeavour to serve God, to contemplate the appointed end of our earthly existence with cheerfulness and satisfaction, as the period of our admission, through the mercy of our Father, to the better things which are at his right hand ; and amidst the pains, disappointments, and bereavements of our chequered lives, let the conviction of the wisdom with which our trials are appointed, and our firm faith in their blissful end, render us resigned and even happy.

Thus our whole lives will manifest our faith, a faith which is worthless unless it be seen in our lives, that as Jesus our Lord liveth we shall live

also, and we shall be in some degree fitted, when called from the present scene, to join his faithful followers in the assembly of the just made perfect in heaven.

## NEWNESS OF LIFE.

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ROMANS vi. 4.

“ That like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

IN the passage from which these words are taken, the apostle guards against the possibility of his previous doctrine being perverted to the sanction of sin, and proceeds to show its efficacy for producing holiness and virtue. “ Do ye not consider, that as many of us as have been baptized into Christ Jesus, have been baptized into his death ? ” All who have, by baptism, made profession of faith in Christ, have done so with a particular reference to his death, and the doctrine which was established by it. “ We are, therefore, buried with him by baptism unto death.” Immersion in the water used in baptism may be taken as a figurative representation of being dead and buried—it shows, that those who become Christians must give up all connection with their previous state, that is, the state of ignorance, idolatry, and vice, in which the gentile converts at Rome had lived,



before they were brought to receive the Gospel; must be extinct with respect to it, as Christ was to the world, when he expired on the cross and lay in the grave—"that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we also may walk in newness of life,"—that as Christ, by a glorious display of divine power, was raised to a new and nobler state of existence, they also, looking forward, according to his promise, to a similar change for themselves, and brought by him to a knowledge of what God requires, should, as his disciples, lead a new kind of life, conforming their conduct and conversation to the state into which they were privileged to enter. "For if we have," in our baptism, "conformed to the resemblance of his death, we should also conform to the resemblance of his resurrection," by the new and better life which we lead—"considering this, that our old man"—the expression by which the apostle designates the habits and principles of the unconverted gentile state—"has been crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin: for he who is dead is free from sin,"—as the slave by death is freed from his master, so the old man being dead, sin can no longer claim authority over us. "And if we be dead with Christ,"—if our baptism is a figurative conformity to his death, and termi-

nation of our former ignorant and corrupt state—"we believe that we should also live with him." As he is raised to a new life, we also should enter on a new course of conduct, conformable to the principles and expectations which we have received from him—"knowing that Christ being raised from the dead, dieth no more—death hath no more dominion over him (for when he died, he died unto sin once"—by that death he entirely terminated his connection with a sinful and suffering state,—“but now he liveth, he liveth unto God,”—being raised, by the power of God, to a new life, which is eternal, that life is dedicated to the glory of God);—“so, likewise, do ye reckon yourselves to be dead unto sin,”—entirely separated from the evil practices of your heathen state—"but alive unto God in Christ Jesus,"—living to the service and glory of God, as taught by Christ, and in expectation of that life in heaven to which he is gone as your forerunner.

Here the apostle abandons the figure of *a new life*, to pursue that of a new and better service, in which the convert is engaged by his faith in Christ. We shall pursue his argument no further, but shall endeavour to make a useful application of the portion we have considered, of which the substance is exhibited in the words of our text.

It is highly important to observe, in the first

place, that the complete change which is in this passage represented by the figure of dying, and entering on a new life, as elsewhere by a new birth and a new creation, was a change peculiar to those who, having been educated in the corrupt principles and practices of heathenism, were brought to a knowledge of the pure doctrines and admirable morality of the Gospel ; a change which cannot take place in those who from childhood have been privileged to hear the words of truth ; who have been taught with their opening reason the character of their Maker and their own obligations, and whatever cause they may have to acknowledge their unworthiness, and repent of their sins, however their convictions may be strengthened and rendered more practical by impressive events, or the powerful representations of religious teachers, can hardly undergo an entire change of opinions, principles, and motives sufficient to justify so strong a metaphor. In fact, when the apostolic language respecting dying and entering on a new life, the old and new man, or the new creation, all which is appropriate to the change from heathenism to Christianity, is directly and closely applied to the circumstances of Christians in the present day ; it only serves to encourage enthusiastic notions and extravagant expectations, and to substitute a dependence on

imagination or feeling for the serious and sober pursuit of Christian excellence. The notions of the necessity of conversion to those who already acknowledge the truth of Christianity, and of a sudden and complete change in the state of the mind being thus effected, are highly dangerous : they interfere with that constant progress, that constant desire after increased excellence which are the true characters of the Christian life ; they encourage spiritual pride and presumptuous confidence, and sanction the hopes of a sufficient repentance on the approach of death, by which men are so often led on in a course of sin. But whilst we must be careful not to apply to ourselves what the apostle tells his gentile converts at Rome, respecting their change from a state of gross ignorance and moral degradation, to one of privilege and blessed hope, we cannot fail to observe that the argument respecting the conduct which ought to be maintained is equally applicable to all who enjoy the Gospel light, whether it has newly shone upon them, or has enlightened the whole of their course.

Christ has been raised from the dead to an immortal and glorious life, of the reality of which, and of its being designed for all the sojourners in this transitory state, he was made the proof and the pledge : as believers in him, we are called to

contemplate the event of his resurrection, and the promises connected with it in their influences on our own situation, and on the determinations to which true wisdom would direct us respecting our own conduct. Our condition is greatly altered from what it would be independently of any sufficient proof of our destination beyond the grave. We are still but strangers and pilgrims upon earth, but we know that this short and transient being has higher objects than momentary enjoyment; that even its pains and trials may, if properly applied, be converted into blessings, and that always to look to the closing scene, and regulate our pursuits by a regard to what is to follow in a state which as yet we can see only with the eye of faith, whilst it really confers upon us the truest happiness even with respect to the present, is so imperatively required by the expectations we have reason to form for the future, that to neglect it is a wilful sacrifice of a good which is in our power, and which is incomparably the most worthy of our exertions to secure it. If the reflection should ever suggest itself to our minds, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die;" if our observation of the vanity of life, and the uncertainty and transitoriness of all earthly good, should for a moment incline us to attach little importance to our conduct, and to give ourselves up to the



guidance of passion and impulse,—we are recalled by the consideration that “after death cometh judgment,” and that the shorter our time of preparation for that awful scene, the more necessary it is that we should make the best use of what is allotted to us; that however trifling in themselves may be the affairs of time, when considered as affecting our condition in unknown worlds, they deserve all our care and diligence, and hold out a sufficient reward for all well-applied exertions. “Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,” and having ascended to heaven, was enabled still to assist and communicate with his disciples on earth, that he might prove and illustrate his own promises respecting an existence after death and unconnected with this world; that he might fix upon that unseen state the hopes and affections of all who received his religion, and thus at once provide them with the only effectual consolation amidst the sorrows and sufferings of life, and with the only sufficient motive for resisting the seductions of pleasure, and adhering to the course of duty. That the life which should be led by believers in the resurrection of Christ must be very different from that which those who are ignorant or thoughtless of futurity may imagine to be wise or justifiable, is sufficiently evident.



Let us now particularly consider what is implied in that newness of life in which we are required to walk, and how its necessity arises out of a consideration of Christ having been raised.

In the first place, it implies our receiving and applying to the regulation of our conduct that information respecting God, and what he requires from his creatures, which has been from time to time communicated by revelation, which in the Gospel was improved and opened to mankind at large, but which unassisted they were never able to obtain. Unless Jesus in the accomplishment of his mission, and the establishment of his religion, had died upon the cross in obedience to the will of God and devotedness to the good of all mankind, sacrificing himself to the fury of his enemies; unless he had been raised again from the dead by the glory of the Father, and, having thus given incontestable proof of his authority, had sent forth his disciples furnished with Divine gifts to preach in his name, we must have remained in a state of heathen darkness, entertaining the grossest conceptions respecting the attributes, character, and worship of God, and lost in that universal depravity of manners which prevailed throughout the world, we should have been in that state which is described by the apostle as the "old man," and as "being dead in trespasses and sins."

From this state there was no deliverance until Christ came; nor by the mere power of human reason could there, as far as we can see, ever have been any. Through him we are called to a new and better mode of life; we are taught to worship and adore a pure and holy God—to consider him as the observer of all our actions, to know what he requires from his creatures, and to seek his favour as our chief good. Thus instructed, we cannot be, as those were whose minds had never received the Gospel light; if we are not so greatly changed in our habits, principles, and actions, as to be considered as leading a new and altogether different life, we are unworthy of our privileges, and disgrace our calling. *Secondly*; the newness of life, in which all true Christians should walk, implies their having constancy and resolution to restrain their evil dispositions and corrupt desires, to sacrifice the inclinations which are not sanctioned by duty, and to persevere in a course of self-denying obedience to the end of their earthly probation. The Christian rule, though approving itself to our best feelings, and though its observance yields the purest pleasure, by controlling all undue indulgences of sense and passion, is opposed to inclinations naturally excited, and often powerfully felt. Our master himself was called upon for extraordinary sacrifices and sufferings, in the fulfil-

ment of his Father's will, and we are all required to take up our cross and follow him. He died to deliver the world from the power of sin; we must endeavour to crucify the flesh, with its affections and lusts. He was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, to enter on a purer and nobler existence, from which sin and suffering are for ever excluded; we should aspire to a spiritual life. Guided by the holy principles, and influenced by the animating motives, of the Gospel, we should be dead to all vicious indulgences and corrupt practices—dead to the world, to whatever is evil and degrading in the state of things around us; but having within us the living spirit of holiness and charity, excited by the example and promises of our master, to constant endeavours after excellence, cherishing within us the love and fear of God, and thus “alive unto him” through “Jesus Christ.”

*Lastly*; the *newness of life* to which we are called, includes a constant reference and regard to a state to come. Virtue may be true wisdom, and in holiness of heart and life may be the greatest peace and satisfaction which the world can bestow; but if there be nothing beyond to hope or fear, few will think the difference of good in this fleeting scene worth the struggle against present inclination and passion; few will find the promised

advantage a sufficiently powerful motive to give them the control over their own conduct. It is in connection with the assurance of a judgment which is to follow death, a righteous retribution for all the deeds done in the body, whether good or evil, that our conduct here becomes to us most truly important, and that we find abundantly sufficient motives for directing it according to the demands of duty. The few years of mingled pain and pleasure, which we are ordained to spend in this world, will soon be past; but we know not how long may continue the effects of the manner in which we employ them. The happiness which we are capable of obtaining, is above what our present capacities can estimate, and the *tribulation and anguish* which must be upon every soul of man that doeth evil, cannot but be considered as such, that, weighed in comparison with it, all earthly suffering is but as the small dust of the balance. No reasonable doubt remains to us respecting our future destination. "Christ has been raised from the dead by the glory of his father." He, our elder brother, a partaker with us of the same nature, having died, has been called to a new existence, and is gone as the pledge and pattern of our own change, to that state in which we all trust, according to his word, that if we live as his disciples, we shall appear with him in glory; in which we believe that we

must all stand in his judgment, and receive the appropriate recompense of our conduct. What can we do, then, but live as expectants of immortality—regulate our actions by a regard to the permanent happiness which alone deserves our serious care, and, blessing God for having raised up from the dead our Saviour, Jesus Christ, show our faith in his resurrection, and our confident expectation of our own, by leading a new and truly Christian life here below, and using all the changes of time in preparation for the happiness of heaven !

## THE CHARACTER OF JESUS PERFECTED THROUGH SUFFERING.

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HEBREWS ii. 10.

“ For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.”

THE sufferings which, for the accomplishment of his glorious and beneficent mission, our great Master was called upon to undergo, both during his active life and in immediate connection with his death, cannot fail to impress every serious reader of his history, and must be regarded with the deepest interest by all believers in his Divine authority. We may view them in various lights, but we always find them appearing important in their relation to ourselves, and suggesting to our minds considerations immediately useful to us, in the practical consideration of his religion.

The great design of our Saviour's mission, in the accomplishment of which he endured so much, was to rescue mankind from the power and dominion of sin, and to bring many children of God to the privileges of their Father's house; to the glory and happiness produced by knowledge of, and



obedience to, his will. His sufferings were on his part a voluntary sacrifice for the accomplishment of this grand end, and as such are calculated to excite towards him our love, admiration and gratitude, whilst they lead us to the imitation of his disinterested benevolence, and pious submission to the Divine will.

We may also consider the temptations, trials, and afflictions to which he was exposed, as the means appointed by his God and father for purifying and exalting his own character, and rendering him in all things a complete model and guide to his followers. This is the view of the subject, upon which our text invites us now to bestow some serious attention.

The observation of the writer to the Hebrews is, that "it was a suitable and proper thing for the author and disposer of all things, in bringing by the Gospel dispensation many sons unto glory, to make the first preacher of the doctrine of salvation perfect through sufferings." It is obvious to remark, that whilst God is here designated as "him for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, who is bringing many sons unto glory," he is plainly pointed out as the original and free author of Gospel salvation; nor is it easy to comprehend how such language can be understood or explained by those who represent Jesus Christ as

the proper source, or as the purchaser of the blessings he communicated. But we are immediately led by this passage to the contemplation of the trials, difficulties, and sufferings endured by our Saviour, as the means employed for perfecting his character; means as seem to be clearly taught in the text, without the application of which, it would not have reached that perfection by which it was distinguished.

Labour, pain, and temptation, are the only means by which human nature can be elevated to the highest state of excellence of which it is capable, the state for which it is ultimately designed. They are the only means by which the character can be formed to true dignity and greatness, and by which its superiority can be proved and exhibited. It is to train and fit us for our future more glorious condition, for that higher rank among the works of God which we are destined some time to reach, that the various troubles, afflictions, and temptations with which this world abounds, have been wisely appointed for all of us; and those whom Providence has designed to raise to extraordinary greatness in the present state, have been very generally exercised by trials proportionable to the elevation at which they have arrived.

Virtue never attains to strength, unless nursed

by adversity and exposed to the varied attacks of temptation. It must be remembered that there is a wide difference between the excellence of which we are now speaking, and mere *innocence*; the one consisting only in ignorance of evil, the other in resisting and rejecting it; the one in not doing harm—in mere freedom from criminality, the other in doing what is right and good—in vigorous and active virtue. Innocence is the charm of childhood; and the familiarity with the existence and operation of evil which we most of us necessarily acquire, makes us contemplate it with a peculiar pleasure, in part arising from contrast; but understood in the same sense, we must deny the possibility of its existing amidst the various scenes of active life, and it would in fact be a very poor exchange for any moderate attainments in Christian excellence. Who would seriously prefer the blank leaf, with its unsullied purity and whiteness, to that which is inscribed with the glowing effusions of genius and feeling, on account of some few blots with which the latter may probably be stained? In this world we are continually exposed to evil in various forms, and we cannot blind ourselves to its presence. Virtue consists in enduring and resisting it as we ought; it derives from exercise ever-increasing strength, and we have it in our power to go on continually improving, every day advancing nearer

and nearer towards perfection ; “ pressing onward towards the mark, for the prize of the high-calling of God in Christ Jesus.” Without trial, virtue can hardly be said to have an existence ; and the greater the trials which have been passed through well, the more firm and dignified does it become, the more it is advanced towards that perfection which we are taught to make the standard of our aspirations. Hence the frequent declarations of Scripture concerning the blessing and uses of adversity. “ Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, even as a father the son in whom he delighteth.” “ My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into diverse trials.” “ Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh out for us a far more exceeding, even an eternal weight of glory.”

We can even see by a little attention in what manner trial operates beneficially on the character, and how it results from our nature that it must be the only means of producing superior excellence.

Trial consists either in the inducements offered to us by the prospect of the attainment of some object of desire, or of escape from something that we dread ; to depart from a rule of right which we have previously recognised more or less distinctly, or in pains which we have to endure, which may be either sensations or emotions. The first of

these classes we call temptations. He who has no principle of right or sense of duty, is altogether the sport of circumstances, and is not sufficiently advanced in his moral education to profit by the discipline of temptation; but where there once exists a conviction, however acquired, that a certain course of conduct is right, and that we are under obligation to pursue it, then the seductive promises of immediate pleasure to arise from deserting it, and the evils which threaten us as consequences of persevering in it, constitute the moral discipline of temptation, the effect of which on human minds is most important. The supposition that our principles are right, true, or good, implies that acting faithfully according to them will afford us the greatest amount of real and ultimate happiness, so that if the whole results of each course of conduct were present and visible to us, we should, without hesitation, make the right choice. The qualities we want are a sufficiently frequent and careful consideration of the reasons upon which we decide that a certain course is right, and a sufficient exercise of imagination in anticipating and bringing before our minds, with something of the force of reality, the consequences of our present actions. If we never felt temptation we might conform to a rule of right, but we should not be virtuous. Moral excellence, that is, the



mental state which constitutes the highest happiness of beings such as we are, implies the triumph of the future over the present, of a regard for the happiness of others over what immediately concerns our own selfish good. Liability to evil is a necessary condition of capacity for good. Without self-denial, power of resistance, and looking beyond what is present or near at hand, virtue cannot subsist. When temptation triumphs—which must always be through ignorance, want of power to realize what is not present, or feebleness of purpose—each fault prepares the way for others, and suffering, which is the natural cure for evil, becomes necessary. When temptation is resisted, the state of the mind and the affections which leads to its being withstood, is the same which must produce the like result in future; the exercise of our strength increases it, and at the same time increases our confidence; and an association is formed between a certain class of circumstances and the right course of action, which each instance confirms, until what is good becomes natural and easy to us. The test of virtuous character is, that a looker-on may form a reasonable expectation that in any given circumstances our conduct will be what it ought to be; which implies that we have been tried and have shown ourselves possessed both of principle and firmness. It is im-



possible for virtue to command respect, or to act forcibly as an example, except as the result of its having been tested by temptation.

Pain, whether as sensation or emotion, is, sooner or later, an invariable result of moral evil, and is the proper means of its cure ; when thus employed it assumes the name of punishment, but it has other uses also, to which I would now confine our attention. Suffering leads us to a proper estimate of the different classes of pleasures and objects of pursuit amongst mortals. It naturally weakens the power of what is present, and encourages hope and anticipation. By interfering with the influence of the inferior pleasures, it often induces us to seek the higher and nobler ones. By giving leisure for reflection, and making it a resource, it often does much in confirming good principles, and fortifying the mind against future temptations. It enables us better to sympathize with the sufferings of others, and hence gives us a much more lively desire to serve and bless them. It is the great teacher of humility, by making us acquainted with our weakness ; of piety, by exercising and putting to the proof our confidence in our heavenly Father. Though chastening be the grand means of correcting what is wrong, the mind which is possessed of pure and right principles, is peculiarly capable of profiting by affliction, and is

especially elevated and strengthened in all that is good, by its influence—so that nothing can be more unreasonable than to regard the trials of life as signs of Divine displeasure ; but they are always to be received as means of improvement, which, if properly used, must promote our real happiness. We cannot, ourselves, now understand why they are appointed, but we can trust a father's goodness, and look forward to a day when all that is now dark shall be illumined, and we shall trace the blessing of affliction in its final results.

That the character of our Lord Jesus Christ was actually, as is clearly testified by our text, formed and perfected by means similar to those employed in the formation of human characters, is abundantly established by a reference to the Gospel histories. We find that he spent the first thirty years of his life in privacy, before he was sent forth on his arduous mission—a period during which he was, doubtlessly, being prepared and trained, by various discipline, for his important and glorious work. We are told, that “he grew or increased in favour both with God and man;” words which, even if their authority should be held doubtful,\* show the prevalence of the senti-

\* They are found in those introductory chapters of Luke's Gospel, the genuineness of which has been by some accounted questionable.

ment that his excellence was progressive. On his first entrance into public life, we find him exposed to and overcoming several powerful temptations, to misuse, by applying them to his own aggrandisement, the miraculous powers with which he was endowed, where let it be observed that the Divine communications and extraordinary aids he received were so far from excluding him from the possibility of being tempted, and making his case in this respect essentially different from ours, that they were even the occasion of some very dangerous temptations, to which we of course are not liable.

As we follow him through the trying scenes of his ministry, we find him, it is true, always fully performing the will of God; but we are also able, sometimes, to observe traces of the struggle by which he overcame his natural feelings and wishes, to admire his mind, rising superior to difficulties, and emerging with brighter radiance from amidst clouds of temptation. Read the account of his agony in the garden of Gethsemane.—See piety and benevolence triumphing over the fear of torture and of death, in their most appalling forms; observe the struggle between nature and principle, and you will justly estimate, and truly reverence, the character thus perfected by suffering.

How strikingly inconsistent with the declaration

of our text, and with the history to which I have referred, is the popular notion of the proper Deity of our Saviour, originating in a misconception, in ignorant times, of the manner in which God was always with him, and he was "one with the Father."

It is a part of the perfection of the Divine nature, that "God cannot be tempted by evil." He is absolutely and essentially perfect. A human being can only be called perfect relatively, and his excellence must be acquired. God cannot be acted upon by temptation; man must rise above temptation by resisting it. Consider then the life of Christ, and say, was it the life of God or of man? He is affirmed to have been tempted "as we are;" and the perfection ascribed to him is spoken of as the effect of his sufferings. To all this his history exactly corresponds. If, then, to feel all the temptations of humanity, to struggle against them, and to conquer them, be at variance with the idea of Divine perfection, the doctrine of the deity of Christ is inconsistent with every page of his history. Nor can I rest in any middle scheme. If I endeavour to form a conception of angels, it is as beings exalted far above our present condition, in moral attainments, and altogether beyond the influence of earthly trials and temptations, secured from danger by the previous condi-

tion of their minds, and, therefore, in reference to such trials as assail us, properly *impeccable*. But I regard it as most evidently the doctrine of my text, well supported by the whole New Testament history, that our Saviour was by nature capable of sin, inasmuch as he felt the force of temptation, although, through the excellence of his character—the uniformly prevailing power of the pure and holy principles which he taught—he remained actually without sin. I am, therefore, forced to regard him, as I believe the Scriptures really represent him, as a human being, a man like his brethren, to whom he came as a divinely-inspired teacher, and before whom he walked as an example and pattern.

Let us now consider the peculiar value and importance to us of the doctrine, that our Lord Jesus Christ was “made perfect through suffering.”

We are taught to contemplate with the highest veneration the moral attributes of God, and to aspire to imitate those of them of which our nature can bear any resemblance. We rightly desire to conform our minds to his holiness and benevolence, but we cannot help seeing that his very perfection renders him incapable of being to us the example that we want, because his attributes are naturally unchangeable by any circum-



stances, and because many of the qualities required from us, arise out of our mortal and suffering state, and can have nothing analogous to them in the character of an eternal, unchangeable, and all-perfect Being. Hence the wisdom and benevolence of our heavenly Father, making known to us his will by a Messenger, who is to us an example as well as an instructor ; and the importance to us of the doctrine that the perfection of our Saviour's character was formed by circumstances similar in kind to those in which we are placed, and that the imitation of him is possible to our nature, an object to us of reasonable desires and endeavours. On the extent of the sufferings of Christ, and the circumstances which aggravated them, it is not necessary for me on this occasion to enlarge. He is a sufficient pattern to all his followers, because so severe, so varied, and so continued were his trials, that to go through them well required a degree of firm and established virtue, which could not shrink in any other conceivable circumstances of pain or misery. In all their troubles his followers may look to him for an example of steady patience and pious resignation. In all their temptations they may look to him as a pattern of persevering resistance and self-denial.

When we consider our own wants and our own condition in this world of change, and trouble,



and temptation, and the great importance which is justly attached to the example of our Master, we cannot enough admire the wisdom of that Providence, which appointed as our leader to salvation a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; one who was made perfect by sufferings, to whose life therefore we may apply under all trials, to learn of him how we may resist temptation, and turn affliction to our benefit.

In the New Testament we are almost as frequently exhorted to imitate as to obey our Divine master; "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ;" "Looking unto Jesus, the leader and finisher of faith;" "Christ hath suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow in his steps, who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth;" "He that saith he abideth in him, ought himself also so to walk even as he walked." These are general: the instances of particular virtues being recommended by the example of Jesus are too numerous to be brought forward. If we had not our Lord's life and conduct to refer to, our ideas concerning our duty would, notwithstanding his admirable precepts, be in many respects vague and imperfect. It is impossible for the most accurate and finished description to convey to our minds a correct representation of the scenery of nature. It may inform us concerning the parts of which a

prospect is made up, but it cannot give us the effect of the whole; and in the same manner we can judge but badly of a religious or philosophical system, from a mere abstract knowledge of its parts and principles. We must see it in action, in order properly to estimate its value, and still more in order to apply it to our own improvement. So sensible were some of the wisest of philosophers of this fact, that Xenophon has explained his ideas of the proper education and conduct of a prince in a fictitious history of Cyrus, and Plato has promulgated his system of philosophy in its application to the regulation of society, in the account of an imaginary republic formed on its principles and governed by its laws. These great men were obliged to supply by imagination their want of power over realities, but they proceeded on just views of human nature, for they have adopted the very method which has been chosen by the all-wise author of the Christian dispensation, who has caused the Gospel to be handed down to us in histories of the life of our blessed Lord, and of the conduct and teaching of his first disciples; that we may see its principles in their effects; may have a faithful and interesting picture to attract our attention, instead of a mere dry system of morals, and an example to engage our imitation as well as doctrines to instruct, and laws to govern

us. But all that can be said of the excellence and importance of the example of Christ, depends in a great measure upon the doctrine now under our consideration ; that he was perfected by sufferings ; that he was a being like ourselves in his nature, and was fitted for the exaltation he reached, by a discipline similar in kind to that to which we are exposed.

If our Lord were a being whose natural and necessary perfection prevented him from sinning and from suffering ; if his sufferings were either merely seeming, or were felt only by the weak human part, whilst the Divine nature was beyond their reach—then it is difficult to say what advantage his example affords. If he were not acted upon by the same principles, or liable to the same feelings with other men, what great benefit can they derive from studying his conduct ? The solid structure, whose deep foundation is in the living rock, will defy the storms and floods which sweep away the cabin, whose frail materials are but raised upon the sands. The vast oak, whose widespread roots have withstood the fury of the tempests of ages, suggests to us no confidence that the feeble sapling will resist the blast. The asbestos web will come forth pure and bright from the flame which consumes a more perishable material. How then can the victories of a being who is im-

passible and impeccable teach weak mortals to believe that they can triumph over temptation, or lead them into the way of bearing and improving affliction? It is when we think of our Saviour as one who himself conformed to those holy laws, which he has by God's authority commanded us to obey; who was himself sustained under the severest sufferings by that very faith which he requires us to cherish; and triumphed over the most dangerous temptations by means of those pure principles and powerful motives in which we are taught to trust, that we feel the full force of his example, to encourage us in our struggles, and to give us the hope of victory.

Enthusiastic love may be excited by a sense of benefits received, but the admiration of excellence must be cold and inanimate, which is not founded in sympathy, and the attempts at imitation must be feeble which are not enlivened by some hope of success.

The justice of the observation in the text, respecting the wisdom and propriety of the Divine conduct, can only be evident on the principles we have maintained. It is because our great forerunner has trodden the path along which we walk, has resisted the evil and overcome the difficulties to which we are exposed, and has triumphed by the use of the same heavenly armour which he has

directed us to put on, that we are interested and encouraged by his example, and are enabled to walk on amidst trials and dangers with lively faith and cheerful hope, that we may be able to follow him to the heavenly mansions which he is gone to prepare for his faithful followers, in the house of his Father and our Father, of his God and our God.

## CHRISTIAN PURITY.

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MATTHEW v. 8.

“ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

THE language of this beatitude has sufficiently plain reference to Jewish customs and principles. The Jews, it is well known, paid extraordinary attention to bodily purifications, and especially in whatever regarded the worship of God. Neglect of the strictest cleanliness, even of garments, excluded any one from the temple, and prevented him not only from having a part in, but even from witnessing the services of the altar. Now, in Jewish language, the place appointed for Divine worship was the *presence of God*, and to engage in that worship was “*to see God*,” and to appear before him. Thus David, in a Psalm written whilst he was driven from Jerusalem by his enemies, expresses his desire again to join in the services of the tabernacle. “My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God,” i. e. longeth to see him.” “When shall I come and appear before God?” In the text our Lord transfers the purity which is required by true religion, from the person and dress to the heart,



and promises as its reward something higher and more conformable to the spiritual nature of the Gospel, than admission to God's presence in his earthly temple. We may understand this either of that knowledge of the Divine character and will, which through Jesus Christ the pure in heart are enabled to acquire upon earth, according to the meaning of "seeing God" in our Lord's words—"He that hath seen me hath seen the Father"—or of that immediate and delightful sense of the Divine Presence, which shall be enjoyed by the blessed inhabitants of Heaven, where nothing unholy can ever enter. In either sense, whether respecting this world or another, it is true, that "the pure in heart are happy, for they shall see God."

It is a distinguishing excellence of the religion of Christ, in comparison with Judaism, which was vastly the purest and best religion that had previously existed in the world, that whilst the latter in condescension to the then existing state of mankind, both in its precepts and promises, related chiefly to sensible and external things, the former is altogether spiritual in its nature, and has regard to the mind, both in what it commands and what it encourages us to hope. Christianity, in fact, is Judaism spiritualized, and Judaism is true religion adapted to the capacities and wants of mankind in a less advanced state, by being

made in all its parts to wear an outer garb, which is palpable and perceptible by the senses ; whence, in the language of an apostle, the latter is called the *flesh*, the former the *spirit*, than which terms none could be found more strikingly expressive of the difference between them. A rabbi boasting of the extraordinary purity of the Jewish religion, says that not only a clean person must not hold any intercourse with an unclean person, but even an unclean Pharisee must not hold intercourse with any other unclean person. This indeed is a refinement or corruption even of Judaism ; but how strikingly does this finicalness of outward purity contrast with that purity of heart which the Gospel requires, and how highly does a consideration of this difference lead us to admire and cherish our own holy faith, which teaches us that as God is a spirit, a pure and holy spirit, so we must worship and serve him with our spirits ; must obey him in our hearts as well as in our actions ; must conform our minds as well as our outward deportment to his will, and maintain holiness and purity even in our inward parts.

Let us now consider in what the *cleanness* or *purity* of heart, spoken of by our Lord, should be regarded as consisting. And here I shall first remark, that it must by no means be believed to require a perfect freedom from all thoughts and

desires which tend to evil—and for this plain reason, because such an entire purity is not consistent with human nature, or in any way attainable by man. We are so constituted, that the outward circumstances through which we necessarily pass, and even our own feelings, cause thoughts and excite desires directly leading to what is unholy, and the encouragement or gratification of which would be criminal. These are temptations which we are called upon to resist and overcome, and which it is wrong, not to meet with—for of that we have no choice, but to yield to. The error of supposing Christian purity to require a perfect freedom from all intrusion of evil thoughts, is a dangerous one, for this reason: When men find that they are not, and they cannot be, pure in this sense, they take it as a proof that their nature is corrupt, and believing that they can do nothing effectual, they are discouraged from endeavouring after excellence. Not distinguishing between being naturally exposed to temptation, and naturally prone to evil, they make them in effect the same; and because they unjustly condemn themselves, or their first parents, or the God from whom they derive their mental frame, for what they find to be unavoidable, they make themselves deserving of condemnation for what it is their duty and is in their power to avoid. We have, how-

ever, the example of our Saviour himself, to show that evil suggestions may arise in the mind, without tarnishing its purity, if they be at once opposed and rejected; for it seems to me that sufficient reasons have been given for understanding the narrative of his temptation in the wilderness, of the inclinations to make an improper use of his extraordinary powers, which the possession of them at first naturally excited, but which his habitual piety and devotion to his Father's will enabled him instantly to overcome; and we have besides Scripture authority for asserting that "he was in all points tempted even as we are," which is impossible if he were free from those inward temptations which are so dangerous to our virtue. We might as well suppose the unruffled surface of the clear lake to be stained by the shadow of the passing cloud, or the polished mirror to be soiled by the objects it reflects, as the mind to be vitiated by the thoughts which pass over it, neither being voluntarily called up nor retained, or the purity of the heart to be tainted by the evil which intrudes as an unwelcome visitor, but is instantly driven out and chased away. Our Lord could only recommend a quality which is attainable, and which must depend for its attainment on our own exertions, which can by no means be said of that purity which is imagined to consist in entire igno-

rance of, and insensibility to, evil, but which is strictly true of the quality which we conceive to be designated in the text, and of which we shall now attempt to describe the real characters.

Purity of heart is obviously opposed by our Saviour to a mere attention to the externals of obedience, and it consequently implies, with respect to all the vices that can defile and degrade our nature, that we not only abstain from them in our actions, which we might do from worldly motives, but that we also abhor them in our hearts, and being seriously convinced of their injurious and debasing qualities, never think with pleasure of the possibility of falling into them, or suffer dispositions to them to exist unchecked within us. Our thoughts and desires are so far under the control of our reason and our will, that we can always check or drive out those which we really disapprove and dislike; and if we steadily resist those of any particular kind, successful opposition to them becomes more and more a habit, until at length the circumstances which at first excited them cease to have any such effect. We thus gradually acquire dominion in our own minds, strengthen ourselves against temptation, and in a manner close the avenues by which unworthy thoughts and unholy desires might enter our hearts. This, however, requires steady deter-



mination on our parts, and we are at first exposed to great danger from the blandishments of vice. It is thus only by resistance and exertion that that virtue, in which our heavenly Father has made the perfection and true happiness of our nature to consist, and after which we ought constantly to aspire, can be formed. There is nothing noble, exalted, or worthy of our desire, in the innocence which is sinless, only because it has never felt the force of temptation; and instead of complaining of the dangers to which our virtue is exposed, we should bless the kindness which with every temptation gives us a way to escape, and should endeavour to apply to their true ends those thoughts and feelings which would lead us astray from virtue, by making them an exercise of the strength of our good principles, and finding in them a means of exalting the purity of our minds, instead of any defilement of it. From what has been said, it appears that purity of heart, or freedom from any wrong indulgence of the thoughts, wishes, and affections, must depend on the careful cultivation of religious principles, and the frequent and serious consideration of the motives to goodness which religion affords us. It is absurd for us to imagine that we shall be disposed to make any effort, or that any effort we might make could be successful, to resist or drive away thoughts naturally arising



out of our situations and feelings, and at the time promising pleasure, unless we be urged on by strong principles and motives; unless the consciousness that a God of purity observes our thoughts, a prevailing fear of his displeasure, a desire of attaining to superior excellence, and an ardent longing after the rewards of heaven, be ruling principles in our minds, and unless we so frequently reflect upon the justness and importance of these principles, as that they may not lose any of their force. If we conceive it unnecessary for us to use so much precaution, and trust to a present feeling in favour of virtue, instead of providing means for guarding and strengthening it, we shall in all probability suffer the consequences of our presumption and folly. There are many who imagine that they may safely enjoy in imagination the delights of vicious pleasure, though they dare not partake of the reality, and who, erroneously supposing that criminality consists in the outward act, not in the disposition or desire, are ready to make themselves amends for the restraint they unwillingly lay on their actions, by the unlimited indulgence of their thoughts; to such persons may justly be applied our Lord's comparison of the Pharisees to whited sepulchres, which indeed outwardly are fair to look upon, but inwardly are full of dead men's bones; and of all

uncleanness. They are miserably mistaken, if they entertain any hopes of the blessings which belong to the Divine favour. Let them purify the fountain, and the streams that flow from it will be bright and clear ; let the tree be good, and the fruit will be good also ; but it is in vain they pretend to excellence of conduct, whilst they neglect purity of heart. Even if they deceive men, they can obtain no acceptance from that God who observes the springs and motives of their actions. Nor indeed is it to be supposed that uniform and consistent excellence of conduct can be maintained where the heart is not right, for the nature of the tree will manifest itself in its fruits. But purity of heart consists not only in the resistance and rejection of all unholy and unworthy thoughts and desires, but also in the cultivation of those dispositions and affections which raise us most above the mere pursuit of animal and sensual gratifications, and most assimilate us with the Divine nature.

Whatever tends to increase our love and admiration of our heavenly Father—whatever we may in any degree consider as an imitation of his excellences—whatever calls away our souls from the cares of the body, and leads to the cultivation of the powers of the mind, or the affections of the heart, is favourable to Christian purity. Whilst that man must certainly be deficient in it, whose

thoughts are nearly all occupied in cares respecting his bodily part, even though he should not indulge wicked and depraved desires. We must conceive of an elevation of the affections above the things of time and sense, and a devotion of the soul to God and religion, as necessary ingredients in that virtue, whose reward is to consist in more just and delightful conceptions of his character and plans than others are capable of enjoying. Those certainly cannot be strictly spoken of as pure in heart, whose hearts are chiefly occupied in the world and its pursuits, even though they should not be overrun with unholy thoughts, and corrupted by vicious indulgences. We must endeavour to raise our desires and affections to higher and more enduring pleasures, than most of those which here invite our pursuit. We must exercise our powers in seeking to understand and to imitate the Divine perfections. We must cherish those feelings towards God, as our parent, benefactor, and friend, which are due to his character, and are most ennobling and truly delightful to ourselves. We must, in fact, take religion, not merely as the rule of our actions and the controller of our desires, but as the spring of our thoughts, and the spirit of our minds. When we do this, and not till then, we may hope, in its fullest extent, to enjoy the blessing promised to

the pure in heart, and attain to the privilege which our Saviour pronounced to belong to them. And what more glorious, what more truly gratifying and pleasing privilege can we desire? What more exalted reward can be proposed to us, than that of "seeing God"—of being able, whilst here on earth, more clearly and constantly to perceive his presence, to observe his hand, and to feel his care—to understand his character, and to enter into the plans of his providence; and when we leave this world, of being permitted to enjoy the brightest manifestations of his presence, to behold his unclouded glory, and to have a part in that fulness of joy which is in his presence, in those eternal pleasures which are at his right hand?

We are assured, that into heaven "nothing unholy can ever enter." We can only fit ourselves for its employments, and secure a share in its lasting felicity, by maintaining and cultivating purity of mind and conduct. It would be vain for us to expect that the pursuit of vicious pleasure, or the gratification of bad passions, should lead us to the happiness which it promises; and we shall be equally mistaken, if we suppose that we can obtain it by the indulgence of evil thoughts, or the permission of unholy desires. If, then, we believe in the revelations which God has made to us, of his mind and will—if we

value the glorious hopes and promises which he has proposed to us as the reward of obedience—if we desire, even here, to enjoy delightful perceptions of his presence, and obtain glorious and animating views of his character and providence,—and if we aspire hereafter to see his face, and partake in the never-fading bliss which is enjoyed by those who surround his throne; let us, none of us, be contented with external obedience, or with mere abstinence from forbidden things, but endeavour to purify our hearts from all defilement—to govern our thoughts, to regulate our affections, to raise our minds to the noblest objects, and to prepare our way to heaven by the cultivation of heavenly dispositions and affections, and by that Christian purity which has emphatically received the promise, that those who possess it shall see God. To this end, let us carefully examine our hearts. Let us endeavour to imbue our minds with Christian principles, and to give the motives of religion the strongest influence over us. And may that God, who alone is able to keep us from falling, by his grace assist our endeavours, and bring us, at last, into the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.

## THE APPEARANCE OF EVIL.

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1 THESSALONIANS v. 22.

“ Abstain from all appearance of evil.”

THE Christian religion is not more admirable for its grand design, which is to ameliorate the condition of humanity, by leading men to virtue and to happiness, than for the wisdom with which it is, in all its parts, adapted to this great end, and the perfect knowledge of human nature which is displayed in all its precepts and ordinances.

Not content with requiring the outward form of godliness, and attention to all the external duties of religion and morality, it seeks to regulate the thoughts of the heart, and assumes a control over the inmost workings of the mind; and, on the other hand, not satisfied with insisting on the reality of obedience, it demands, also, a regard to the appearance of it, and claims the outward homage, as well as the secret devotion of its subjects.

With a view of directing your attention on the present occasion to this latter branch of our duty



as Christians, I have chosen, as the foundation of my discourse, the exhortation of Paul to the Thessalonians, *Abstain from all appearance of evil*. To explain, illustrate, and enforce which will supply us with abundant materials for the useful employment of a small portion of time.

The meaning of the apostle is, that we ought not unnecessarily to expose ourselves to the imputation of evil; to suffer our conduct to approach so near the boundary of right and wrong, as to be in any degree equivocal, or without good reason to do any thing which is likely to be thought evil by others; in all which cases, although we may ourselves have no intention of departing from the right way, there is that appearance of evil, the character and consequences of which we are now to investigate. It is, however, evident that in performing this duty we must carefully attend to the *motives* of our conduct, and that we may fall into as serious errors under the appearance of *obeying* the apostolic injunction as in the total neglect of it. Whilst our reasons for avoiding any outward semblance of vice or irreligion, or any thing that men may mistake for them, are a hearty conviction of the evil of sin, and a desire to escape all connection with it, a just fear of the bad influences on our characters and conduct, which might result from a contempt of appearances, a regard for the

honour of our holy religion, which must be advanced or injured by the conduct of its professors, and a sense of the duty of setting a good example before our brethren,—we are perfectly safe ; but if a love of reputation in the world, and a fear of the bad opinion of our fellow men, be at all admitted among the grounds of the apostle's precept, we are in great danger of perverting its meaning, and being led by it into serious error. I do not say this as wishing altogether to efface from the mind all interest in the opinions which our fellow men entertain of us, or all sense of their approbation or condemnation. This would hardly be natural, or, unless under very peculiar circumstances, even possible ; and where it seems most nearly to be effected, it is oftener in connection with vice than virtue. So that, upon the whole, a regard, kept within proper bounds, to the opinions of the world, is allowable, and even useful, and will generally be found to be characteristic of a mind at least not entirely alienated from virtue. But so common is the sacrifice of principle to appearances, so dangerous is the influence of the fear of men's judgment, that I should be extremely cautious of admitting a regard to personal reputation as a distinct motive to action — and I cannot suppose that it entered, in any degree, into the apostle's views, when he commanded us to “ab-

stain from the appearance of evil." There are, indeed, so many cases in which the dictates of duty are opposed to what the world requires, that, however we may indulge satisfaction in its smiles, if we look to its approbation as a motive it will draw us into criminal conduct, with a force which we shall not always find it easy to resist; and it is much better for us to strengthen our minds for withstanding it, than to increase its power by acknowledging its right to influence us. Allowing it to be the fact, that the decisions of society at large are generally in favour of virtue, and that at least some appearance of it is necessary for obtaining the applause of men—a concession which, however, ought not to be made without a large allowance for the deceits of false glory and splendid vices, as well as for the pernicious indulgence commonly extended to some actions which religion most strongly condemns—still, when we carefully weigh this worldly reputation, we shall find it very little deserving of the pursuit of those who can obtain so much higher satisfaction from the approbation of their consciences, and the hope of Divine favour; and we shall perceive that its influence depends so much on the character of the particular society into which we may happen to be thrown, that it is altogether doubtful how it may lead us; whilst it is next to certain, that our own

consciences must often drive us in opposition to what would most advance us in the favour of our fellow-creatures. If any weight at all is to be given to the consideration of what men think of us *so far as respects our own feelings*, what will be our situation when, in order to serve God, we are obliged to incur the ill opinion of the world—even of many excellent and valuable characters? When we are obliged to expose ourselves to charges of heresy, presumption, or blasphemy, and, in exposing popular delusions, in practising sincerity and benevolence, are despised, rejected, and condemned by the great majority of mankind? In such situations, which are by no means of uncommon occurrence, instead of attaching undue importance to that favour which we cannot preserve but at too dear a rate, it is better for us to look to the example of our Master and pattern, who, pure, holy, and admirable for every excellence as he was, was nevertheless calumniated and persecuted by an ungrateful world, who considered as evil his benevolent exertions for its salvation. That we should be encouraged and cheered by the sympathy of those who are, like ourselves, lovers of virtue, and who agree with us as to what is right, and good, and true, is natural; but the moment the approbation of men becomes a motive for action, and a consequent fear arises of doing what may to

them *appear evil*, our situation is dangerous—it is time for us to guard our hearts against the fear of men, and to recollect that the opinion of the world is of little consequence to him who enjoys the blessing of an approving conscience. Never, I would say, abstain from any line of conduct, or perform any action, because it will gain or lose you worldly reputation. In this sense, do not *abstain from the appearance of evil*. Do not adopt other men's standard of right and wrong, or be influenced by their views, any further than as they approve themselves to your own judgment and conscience. I have been full on this point, because it seems so natural—it is indeed so common to make a regard to reputation one motive for avoiding the appearance of evil; but I am convinced that this motive cannot be safely employed; that though it may naturally have some influence with us, it is what we are rather required to restrain and control, if we wish to be eminent for the purity of our Christian faith and practice; I am satisfied that the *appearance of evil* will very often be the course of duty. Nevertheless, the apostle's advice properly viewed is admirable and important, and I now proceed to consider the motives on which I conceive it to be founded, and by which it ought to be regulated.

In the first place, a hearty conviction of the evil

of sin, and a sincere desire to oppose it to the utmost. The man who understands that what is wrong must always tend to present or future suffering; that vice and misery are inseparable companions, and that there is no true peace to be found but in the path of duty—must certainly have such a lively abhorrence of what is evil, as to dread and dislike whatsoever bears the remotest resemblance to it. His anxiety to escape pollution and overcome temptation will make whatever looks like sin, or is nearly connected with it, alarming to him, and he will feel disgust at that course, which with a near resemblance of fashionable vices and follies, would aim to avoid their criminality. The appearance of evil can be attractive to those only who wish to practise the reality, but are restrained by fear; and their indulging themselves as far as they dare, is surely no favourable sign of the strength of their good resolutions. Virtue implies the hatred of sin, and that must be a very unsafe state in which we waver between the two, wearing in any degree the semblance or drawing upon ourselves the imputation of what our better judgment condemns. But, *secondly*, there is a natural consequence of the neglect of the appearance of virtue and piety, which shows us the wisdom and value of the precept of the text; there is a danger arising out of



our constitution that the appearance of evil will very shortly lead to the reality. If we allow ourselves to approach near the boundaries of vice—if we suffer forms of sin to become familiar to us, or indulge ourselves in any conduct which establishes a resemblance or connection between us and the wicked—habit will gradually diminish our abhorrence of what is evil, in the same manner as it reconciles us to degrees of heat and cold, which were at first painful, and leads us to like tastes and smells which at first disgusted us. What numbers who have set out in life with the strongest attachment to virtue, and the fullest intention of adhering to it, have sacrificed their peace from not being sufficiently distrustful of their own strength, or being duly aware of the danger attending the appearance of evil! As those who stand on the dizzy summit of a fearful precipice are often seized with an inclination to throw themselves from it, and court the death which threatens them, so there are few who have a head strong enough to contemplate the abyss of vice without precipitating themselves into it, though they know that in doing so they are rushing on destruction. He who understands his own frame, and has a proper sense of his weakness and frailty, will keep himself as far removed as possible from all intercourse with, or resemblance

of, evil. He will be careful to avoid even the slightest show of it, and will never suffer himself to be seduced by the prospect of any trifling advantage into assuming an appearance of which he knows and dreads the danger.

*Thirdly.* That which the apostle seems to have had most immediately in his view, in exhorting his converts to “abstain from the appearance of evil,” is that they should be careful “not to disgrace the holy name by which they were called.” He expresses the same thing differently in the Epistle to the Ephesians: “Neither give place to the devil.” Give not any opportunity to the calumniator. Let not your conduct afford the watchful enemies of your religion any occasion of speaking against it, and be so particular in this respect, as not only to abstain from real sins, but cautiously to avoid what may have the appearance of evil, and may plausibly be represented as such. We must not dread what others may blame in our principles, but we must take care that they detect no real, or even apparent inconsistency between our principles and our conduct, from which they may infer the little power of religion, or our indifference to it, notwithstanding our professions.

All who are sincerely attached to the cause of pure religion, who are sensible of the blessings

which the Gospel has conferred, and of those which it is yet capable of bestowing on the human race, must see the importance of showing the exemplary purity of its morality, by abstaining from whatever may afford ground for reproach, even by an appearance of what is wrong. All who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity, and truly rejoice in the *name* of Christians, will delight to make that name respected and honoured in the world, by walking always before men in a manner worthy of the vocation wherewith they are called. When the exhortation in the text was delivered, the church of Christ was every where surrounded by malignant enemies, who were seeking opportunities of attacking it, and in these times watchfulness against every thing which may be a cause of reproach is scarcely less necessary, not only on account of open unbelievers, and of violent opposers of those peculiar views of Christian truth which we embrace and should endeavour to adorn, but also of the influence which our conduct has upon our fellow disciples; which introduces me to the *last* of those principles on which I found the duty enforced in the text. To set a good example to those around us is manifestly a branch of Christian charity, since it is a way in which we all have it in our power to encourage and serve each other; and it is particularly required from us

all by the precepts of the New Testament. "Ye are the salt of the earth." "A city set upon a hill cannot be hidden." "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven." "In all things show thyself a pattern of good works." "Let us consider one another, to provoke unto love and good works." The propriety of these commands we are every one of us ready to allow, as they relate to others; but almost all persuade themselves, in their own case, that they are not of consequence enough for their conduct to be taken as an example—a curious proof, that although men are in general so prone to vanity, they can, when it suits their feelings at the time, deviate into the opposite extreme of underrating their importance in society; and yet those whom our blessed Lord first addressed as the "salt of the earth," "the light of the world," "a city set upon a hill," were amongst the poor and ignorant, distinguished neither by rank, nor wealth, nor learning—nor by any of those circumstances which usually claim the respect of mankind.

Let, then, the meanest amongst us be convinced, that if he honestly and faithfully discharge the duties of his station, his light shall not be hid, but he shall shine forth as an example to others, and lead them, in the imitation of his excellences, to

glorify his Father who is in Heaven. The man—if such there should be amongst you—who has no family who depend on him, no friends who love him, no servants who look up to him, but stands insulated and unconnected in the midst of society, may say that his conduct is unimportant to any but himself, and let him look to himself: but there is no such man—there is not a being in the universe, who is not connected with his fellows by reciprocal dependence. Every link in the chain of society, as in that of nature at large, is bound to that above and that below it. There does not exist the flower which is

“born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

Its glowing colours may indeed never delight the eye of man! the proud lord of the creation may never imbibe its fragrance—but the wild bee draws honey from its secreted store, the gay butterfly rests upon its bosom, contrasting its beauties with his own, and thousands of sentient beings enjoy the provision which their bountiful Father has thus raised for them out of the bosom of the earth. Apply the analogy, and consider if there can be a human being altogether independent of his race. There is not one who is not bound by some ties; there is not one whose conduct is not important,

from its influence on others' as well as on his own happiness. All are under obligation, as far as possible, to make their example a light and guide to direct their brethren; and to this end it is necessary that they abstain from all appearance, as well as from the reality, of evil—otherwise their light may be only like the *ignis fatuus* gleam, which betrays its followers to danger, or even to destruction.

There are so many careless professors of Christianity, that those who really feel its importance, and are disposed to obey its commands, are peculiarly called upon to make their conduct a public testimony in its favour, by abstaining even from the appearance of whatever might dishonour or disgrace it.

Such are the principles upon which chiefly the obligation of the precept in our text seems to me to depend, and which, surely, afford us abundant motives for obeying it. Consider well, my brethren, unto what a holy and sanctifying faith you are called, and act as becometh those who are blessed with it. Suffer not yourselves to be deceived by the notion that there can be safety under the *appearance of what is evil*; but as you regard your own peace, as you consider your duty to your fellow Christians, or feel the power of Christian love, be careful in avoiding the semblance of



sin: and, so far as your most zealous endeavours will avail, so far as human frailty will permit, present unto the God of purity an offering which the God of mercy will accept.

## THE RETRIBUTORY EFFECT OF MEMORY.

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PROVERBS xiv. 14.

“ A good man shall be satisfied from himself.”

It is the doctrine of Scripture, that the good man shall receive his reward, both in the present life, and in that higher state of existence which is to succeed it; that he shall not only be, on the whole, much happier than the wicked, in respect to external things, but that he shall secure to himself a peace of mind altogether unattainable by those who neglect God's laws—without which, whatsoever of gain or pleasure the world may afford, is deceitful and worthless, whilst with it the evils of life are lightly felt, and cheering beams enliven its most afflictive scenes.

For confirmation of the truth of this doctrine, as far as relates to the present state, I might appeal to the recorded testimonies of past experience, or to the judgment of any who have spent many years among their fellow-creatures, on what they have observed around them. I might quote to you proverbs originating in the very earliest period

of human society, and stamped with the approbation of all succeeding generations. I might ask you whether, reasoning from what you have yourselves seen and known, you have ever esteemed those happy who have flourished by injustice, fraud, and rapacity, or have sought the chief enjoyment of their prosperity in splendour, sensuality, or avarice. But there is another view of the subject, which is well worthy of our attention, and to which I would, at present, direct your minds.

I would show you, from a consideration of our mental constitution, *how* it is that altogether independently of the course of outward events, "the good man is satisfied from himself," and that he only can possess, amidst all changes, such joy, and peace, and consolation as we naturally desire and seek. I shall even find it necessary at this time to confine myself in a great measure to one class of the mental states upon which the happiness of the good man depends, and I shall select that which embraces the pleasures he derives from the review of his past actions, though his advantage with respect to anticipation and hope is neither less evident nor less important. All our enjoyments and pains must arise either from our present circumstances and employments, or from the exercise of our mental faculties upon

our past or future condition. What is present is not found sufficient constantly to occupy our thoughts. Even at that period of life when we possess the greatest degree of activity, when we are most susceptible of the charm of novelty, and when all our passions are in their greatest warmth and vigour, we cannot be always active, or always interested in what is before and around us; even then we are greatly dependent on memory and imagination, and find many an hour pass delightfully or miserably, according to the pictures which they present for our contemplation. By a beautiful and beneficent contrivance, the superior ardour of hope, excited by constant novelty, and as yet unchecked by disappointment, abundantly supplies, in the earliest period, the want of the resources of memory; and, as experience gradually limits the flight, and sobers the colouring, of the one, the other comes in to supply its deficiencies, or rival its attractions. What fancy paints, in glowing youth, of the pleasures and pursuits of the world, is generally so false and illusory, that it is well we are so seldom allowed to make trial of its truth, without at least some attempt having been made to undeceive us by the warning lessons of wisdom. Happy it is for us, if those brilliant tints which at first play over the vanities of this life, instead of being lost as we rise above these

exhalations, are shed, in their full glory, on the bright prospects of futurity, or softly reflected on the rugged and toilsome path we have left behind us. Happy it is if we are consoled for our conviction, that so many terrestrial pursuits are unsatisfying and vain, by the confident anticipation of heavenly blessings, and the joyous retrospect of an honourable and virtuous course; it is at least certain that we very early begin to occupy ourselves much upon the past, as well as the future; and that, as the field of memory is continually enlarging, it assumes constantly increasing importance with us, until at last a decline in the powers of active enjoyment throws us greatly on its resources, and renders us, in a degree which, at some periods of life, we could scarcely have imagined possible, dependent on its accumulated stores.

Is there any who, in the sprightliness of youth, under the enchantment of pleasure, thinks that in the future there is time enough to be wise; that now is the season for gaiety and joy, and that when hope can no longer find a subject below, it will naturally lead the way to the state which is to follow? I stop not now to remind him of the disappointment he must experience even in attaining what he desires, of the uncertainty of the days on which he reckons, or of the improbability that hope, worn out in the chase of

folly, and clogged with the mire of sin, will at last, with feeble, drooping wing, direct her flight to scenes of distant glory. I stop not now to ask him whether his imagination, agitated by the solemn warnings of religion, is not more likely, as he approaches the boundary of things seen, to present to him terrific and appalling pictures; but I would impress upon him that so long as he remains a tenant of this earthly tabernacle, there is a faithful mirror ever forcing the past on his review, as well as an opening through which he endeavours to discover the misty future. In that mirror all is shown clearly, distinctly, and connectedly. He can no longer avail himself of the deceptive excuses which satisfied him at the moment for doing wrong. Vice loses its attraction, but plainly shows its true character and effects. Evil is no longer palliated, but it is perceived and traced even to its present wretched consequences. If he have passed by the opportunities of securing real bliss; if he have despised the delightful refreshments offered to his taste, but seized the forbidden fruit, "which turns to ashes on the lips;" if, not content with doing wrong himself, he have seduced and misled others, causing misery which it is no longer in his power to cure,—all this is frequently set before him; he is compelled to dwell upon it and realise every part. He must do



so again and again in the lengthening intervals of his active pursuits. More and more he becomes dependent on his own internal resources, and more and more these horrid images (haunting him as spectres of his departed pleasures) agonise him with the conviction of past folly, and the dread of its further consequences. Imagination seeks its materials as much in memory as in surrounding objects and passing sensations, and no pleasing expectations can be indulged for the future, where the past utters only reproaches. Miserable then—most miserable—is the state of that man to whom, in advancing years, the scenes he has gone through can suggest only painful and gloomy reflections! Let none be so deceived as to imagine that if convinced of his error, he can separate himself from his past conduct, and evade its effects; for even if God would accept of a late repentance made in the prospect of death, or when sin can no longer charm, as a sufficient proof of freedom from the corruption of vice and fitness for the purity of heaven, the nature he has given us will not allow us to escape from the punishment we have deserved. Memory will bring up in dark array before awakened conscience the crimes and follies of departed years. Remorse, with worse than scorpion stings, will torment the agitated mind, and despair will brood in darkness on the fearful future.

Since then we find that memory exerts an influence so important, so seldom duly considered, on the happiness of life, it is worth our while carefully to examine the effect of different kinds of actions and events when looked back upon by the mind, that we may thus establish an additional and very valuable criterion for determining our choice amidst the various attractions of the world. We shall not, I believe, find much difficulty in satisfying our inquiries. If, when tempted by any vicious pleasure, we would seriously put the question to our minds, how it would appear when looked back upon from a distance—how even as soon as the moment of enjoyment is over?—we could seldom fail of being so much struck with the answer, as to despise and reject the momentary enjoyment. How happy would it be for us, could we be more influenced by reflection and anticipation, less enslaved to present and sensible things! How much wiser then would be our actions! How much more pure our pleasures!

To proceed, then, with our proposed examination. What, let us ask, will be the effect of sensual pleasures, especially of vicious indulgences? What of the toilsome chase of riches and worldly greatness? What of the pursuit of knowledge, and intellectual labour? What of virtuous self-denial, and resisted temptation? What of bene-

volent exertions, and what of the pains, disappointments, and sorrows of life, when no longer acting upon us as present things, but laid up in the archives of memory, and calmly reviewed as a store from which our remaining days are to be supplied with recollections which we should wish to be cheering and consoling?

Alas, my friends, for him who relies on mere sensual pleasure for any future satisfaction! Even when not carried beyond the permitted bounds, it is peculiarly its quality, as if to counterbalance the force with which its near prospect attracts us, that it does not satisfy us in the review. We always wonder afterwards what it was which exerted so powerful a charm, and regard with indifference, except so far as they are relieved by associations of intellectual gratification, or affectionate feeling, the most brilliant of its departed joys; but if we have indulged to a forbidden and degrading excess—if we have purchased pleasure by a base or unworthy action—if we have snatched it where the laws of God have forbidden us to touch, or have suffered ourselves, against our better judgment, to be seduced into scenes where gaiety hides corruption, how is it, then, that we are affected in looking back upon such conduct? What feelings, but those of loathing and disgust, can follow such enjoyments; what does the recol-

lection of them cause us to think of ourselves, of our judgment, of our firmness, of our reasonable grounds for hoping for Divine mercy? Does any man plunge into the filth of sensuality, and not afterwards feel himself defiled and degraded by it? Does any listen to the siren voice of pleasure, and not feel that he was drawn from his course only to be destroyed—and not bitterly lament his weakness and folly? It is nothing to say that no possible satisfaction can ever arise from the recollection of vicious indulgence—it must be a perpetual source of vexation or of fear—it must so imbitter after-life, that nothing but deep contrition, and long-sustained efforts, effectually to change the disposition, can restore peace and composure to the mind. We need not, surely, say much of hours devoted to the attainment of riches and power. The business of life demands from most of us diligence and activity; and, whilst conducted with honour and principle, in doing full justice to others, and not envying them their advantages, the hours it has occupied, if not looked back upon with peculiar interest, will at least afford a general satisfaction, and, if God have blessed our labours with prosperity, we shall enjoy it unrepached, with a consciousness of having done something towards deserving it; but all that belongs to wealth and greatness is, after all, but

vanity and vexation of spirit, uncertain both in its continuance and in its power of pleasing; and at best a miserable return for the avaricious cares, the envious feelings, the illiberal—not to say unjust—conduct by which men too often labour to obtain it. If the retrospective eye must dwell on these, not all that the world can give of outward good, will compensate for the bitter reflections they will occasion.

What, then, must be said of the pursuits of science, the search after knowledge, and the exertions of intellect? These are among the occupations of our time and faculties, which give no cause for repentance. The results of our labour belong to the mind. There are collected stores on which it dwells with increasing satisfaction, as it learns with greater clearness to arrange—with greater skill to combine them; and as even the difficulties which occur to us in the search after truth and knowledge, serve to call our powers into more vigorous exercise, and to animate our zeal, the review of them only gratifies us with the consciousness of intellectual energy, whilst it revives the remembrance of rational and unreprieved delights.

We advance to yet higher pleasures: and I am well persuaded, that when I affirm that no recollection can be stored in the mind, affording more

pure, lively, or durable gratification, than of our having sacrificed our inclinations on the shrine of duty, or triumphed in the arduous struggle with the temptations of the world, every virtuous mind will sympathize in the sentiment, acknowledging that, with such rewards, the labours of virtue are not even here left unrepaid. While we are engaged in the contest with temptation, and are suffering its needful discipline, we have indeed to resist and endure, to a degree which demands our utmost exertion: well may we be required to "take up our cross and follow our master," to "crucify the flesh, with its affections and lusts." But if, directed by his precepts, and encouraged by his example, we can bear the trial, and withstand the allurements, what is there that the world affords, which we would exchange for the feelings with which we reflect on such a circumstance? what are all earthly charms in comparison with them? They are not feelings of pride and self-exaltation, and presumptuous boasting; but of chastened joy and humble hope, of lively conviction of the value of truth and goodness, and ardent desires after increased excellence; they are feelings which leave spots of undying freshness and beauty in the memory, to cheer and enliven future years: unite with them the recollections of benevolent exertions and sacrifices—of opportuni-



ties which we have well employed, of relieving distress, consoling affliction, diffusing useful knowledge, or promoting the moral and social improvement of our brethren: and what more do we require to twine an amaranth wreath of unfading beauty?—what can be wanting, that we may be satisfied, from our own minds, and may find, in our reflections on the scenes through which we have passed, the most delightful refreshment amidst present labours, and the best encouragement to future activity?

It only remains for us to inquire how far the calamities and sorrows incident to our mortal condition have power to sadden our pleasing recollections, and make memory a source of pain to many a virtuous mind. So far is this from being the case, that by a most wise and benevolent appointment of Providence, our sufferings become, in a distant review, even an additional source of pleasure to us. The hardships we have passed through, the pains we have endured, are exhibited by memory so softened by distance, and touched by the harmonizing tints of time—like the ruined tower once the seat of war and violence, but now surrounded by the green untrodden turf, embraced by the ivy, and painted with the gray and yellow lichens—that they only gently remind us of the contrast between past suffering and present peace, so as to give us a livelier feeling

of our blessings. Even the ravages of death are not contemplated with lasting pain by the religious mind. The parting hour is one of sadness and depression: but when we have dwelt on the assurances of faith, and the consolations of piety—when time has worn down the keen edge of sorrow, and we rise from tears and grief, to engage in the remaining duties of life, better fitted for their proper performance, like the flower oppressed with the dews of morning, when it lifts up its head to the sun, better prepared to support its ardours—we then find that we have been blessed in our affliction, that we are less worldly, less selfish, more moderate in our own desires, more anxious to do our part in the service of others, more considerate of our frailty, and more interested in the state to come. Then the remembrance of the days spent with the departed object of our affections becomes not only a pleasure, but a valuable means of improvement to us; and, as we dwell on the well-remembered proofs of an amiable, pious, and virtuous disposition, we draw sweets from the bitter flowers, hopes of joyful re-union and uninterrupted bliss, from the contemplation of bereavement and separation.

You see, then, my brethren, that under all the circumstances of life “the good man is satisfied from himself;” that independently of ex-

ternal events, and by the very constitution of our minds, he is happy, because his memory furnishes him with the most pleasing subjects for contemplation and reflection. Stores of delight, collected during life's bright and sunny days, to cheer its wintry hours, when the season of activity is past—of which neither the accidents of fortune, nor any of the sorrows of time, can deprive him.

On the contrary, this very faculty of memory is made the sure punishment and scourge of the wicked. It never fails to bring before him his neglected opportunities, his violated duties, his false and miserable attempts at pleasure. It aggravates to him those evils of life which come alike to all—destroys his relish for external good, and renders him more and more unhappy, as advancing years bring him nearer to that time when remorse must be followed by retribution.

## CHRISTIAN HOPE.

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ROMANS xii. 12.

“Rejoicing in Hope.”

THESE words will naturally introduce some reflections on the subjects of Christian hope, and its influence on the character and happiness of those who cherish it.

Hope is the anticipation of obtaining any of the objects of desire. As in this world we are seldom permitted fully to accomplish any of our wishes, and it is inconsistent with our nature to be ever entirely occupied with present things, so that we are continually either reverting to the past, or stretching our eager view into futurity, hope is one of our most pleasurable feelings, and enters largely into all our enjoyments. When success attends us in any of our labours or pursuits, we do not merely enjoy our present advantages—we look forward to the completion of our projects, imagining the joy that shall then crown our toils, and the rest which shall repay them; or else having perfected a structure which we had long contemplated as the height of our desires, we now

regard it but as a foundation for new erections, and count what we have accomplished as little compared with what we may yet succeed in effecting. Thus, though everything here is unsatisfying and vain, though the heart is continually acknowledging itself disappointed in the attainment of what it had desired, and though so often its most confident expectations remain unfulfilled, yet is there always something to interest and excite us ; some gay vision, ever dancing before our eyes, some aerially-painted summit ever inviting our ascent. Kind and compassionate is the appointment of our all-wise Creator, who thus at once softens to us the pain of disappointments which are indispensable in our present state, and, by constantly carrying our thoughts beyond the sphere of present things, gives something of an elevated and intellectual character even to our commonest pleasures. But alas ! that the hopes which men too generally cherish are so deceitful and unworthy. Alas ! that they so seldom distinguish the objects of rational desire and pursuit, or dwell with delight on the probable attainment of those things which would make them most truly happy. Hence it is—because a good Providence often in mercy disappoints expectations the fulfilment of which would be our worst misfortune—that Hope is so commonly regarded as a mere deceiver, and that

whilst we cannot help listening to her whispered tales, and looking through her richly-tinted glass, we consider it as the part of Prudence to distrust her promises and reject her consolations. Could we but set our affections on objects truly worthy, and make use of our reason in choosing the path by which they are to be approached, we should enjoy the pleasures of Hope, but should have much less cause to complain of her delusions; her voice would still cheer, and her pencil enchant us, but we should have no reason to fear her misleading or betraying us. The hopes which relate to this world and its affairs must always be doubtful, and our security consists in not attaching too much importance to them, even whilst we allow them to enliven our present path, and animate us in the ordinary labours of life. But there are hopes, and those most delightful, most soothing, most encouraging, which are attended with no danger of disappointment; which consist in realizing and beginning already to enjoy the glorious certainties of a futurity which religion unveils to the eye of faith; which consist in anticipating the manifestations of God's perfections and the results of his government from his own promises, or from principles which he has enabled us clearly to ascertain. These are hopes not painted on a bubble which is dissipated by a breath, or fea-



thering in variegated splendour the insect wing which a touch lays bare, but rather like the precious opal, whose varying lustre shifts and blends all the hues of beauty, whilst as we change its aspect we only multiply its charms. They rise clear and bright, bounding this vale of life like distant Alpine summits when morning sunbeams irradiate their snowy crowns, elevated above its mists, and catching a glorious light from the heaven towards which they soar.

The hopes which have no nobler aim than the riches, honours, and pleasures of the world ; which spring from desires in themselves mistaken, dangerous, and degrading—may lead us on in vain pursuit, and then vanish, or change to appalling visions ; but when the mind dwells upon the most rational, pure, and ennobling objects, until it can determine the means proper for their attainment, and can clearly anticipate the happy result ; when, amidst external changes and the uncertain or afflictive events of life, it can constantly look forward to prospects of improvement, and of real and enduring bliss—that hope indeed is worthy to be cherished, an anchor for the soul amidst the storms of time, a compass steadily pointing to the haven of eternal peace.

Let us consider a little in detail the hopes which are derived from religion, and which exert their

powerful influence in the mind of the sincere and intelligent Christian.

We may place first, the hope he entertains of his own improvement, in all the qualities and affections which belong to his profession. Accepting his religion as the best gift of God, the source of the truest happiness to all who really apply it; and aware that its blessings must be proportioned to the degree in which it is felt and acted upon, *he* is satisfied with no formal or divided service. It is his humble, but sincere and anxious desire, to be all that Gospel principles would make him. He feels his weakness, he knows the dangers by which he is surrounded, he mourns for his frequent errors; but he feels, also, that the love of God and of virtue is in his heart; he knows the value of that holy faith, through which his master and exemplar, though tempted, was without sin—he rejoices in the promised mercy of his Heavenly Father, and whilst endeavouring to set in the fullest light, all the motives to goodness—to open within him all the springs of pious and benevolent feelings, he cherishes the delightful hope, that he shall rise more and more above frailty and passion—that he shall increase in strength, and grow in nearer approach to that high standard which he aspires to reach. To be satisfied with our present condition, becomes not the very best of erring

mortals—and is more likely to be the character of those who are yet far removed from the excellence they might reasonably be expected to attain. The more carefully we consider the principles of Christianity, the higher will be our conceptions of what it is capable of making those who unreservedly submit themselves to its influences. The more faithfully we study the state of our own hearts, the more we shall be convinced how much it wants improvement, and the better we shall know where our watchfulness and diligence are peculiarly required; thus our hopes will not be the mere sport of the imagination, produced by vague desires, but will be reasonable and well-founded, and will occupy so much of our thoughts and interests, as greatly to contribute to their own accomplishment. Thus, as we pursue our devious course amidst outward changes, by us absolutely uncontrollable, we shall steadily and cheerfully look forward, having one object at least of our most anxious care, which may be promoted amidst all varieties of our condition, and the prospect of success in which may well enable us to bear many trials. It is indeed a glorious prospect. We feel that we are formed for progressive improvement; that our minds, the noblest part of our nature, invite and will repay our culture. To store them with knowledge and wisdom is a most

honourable undertaking, and the hope of enlarging our acquisitions of this kind is worthy to engage and delight reasonable and intelligent creatures: but as our moral state has a yet nearer connection with our happiness; and in the government of our passions, and the right regulation of our affections, is our highest glory, as well as our only true and permanent bliss—the hope of adding to our virtuous attainments, of purifying our hearts and elevating our desires, ought ever to engage our warmest interest, and, whilst it calls forth our best exertions, should afford us the highest satisfaction.

Another hope founded on religion, which the truly good man must ever cherish with delight, relates to the improvement of the moral, intellectual, and social condition of our fellow-creatures. Subject as it is to various evils, the condition of man in this world is, upon the whole, a happy and desirable state, sufficient to show the wisdom and goodness of the Being who placed him here, and to establish abundant claims on his gratitude; but we cannot bestow upon it much consideration, without being convinced that it is capable of great amelioration. We cannot receive the instructions of Divine religion, without perceiving that that amelioration is intended, and being made aware of the means by which it is to be effected. We are led to observe the analogy of the growth of an

individual, and the gradual development both of his physical and intellectual powers with the progress of the species. We are made sensible that the various dispensations of religion have been adapted to the different periods of that progress which they were specially designed to promote, and that whilst Christianity has already conferred incalculable benefits, nothing is needed but a more complete application of its principles and precepts to effect all which enlightened philanthropy can desire.

Every good mind must *wish* that the most valuable blessings of knowledge could be generally diffused; that education should form our youth to habits of virtue; that tyranny, oppression and slavery should be banished from the earth; that war should suspend its horrors, and that the advantages of civilization and religious instruction should be diffused among the nations which yet sit in darkness. The enlightened Christian not only regards these blessings as objects of desire, but also as possible to be promoted by him, and as sure to be finally accomplished. He *hopes* all that is good for the destinies of his race. He anticipates the time when truth and liberty, when peace, justice and charity, shall prevail; he sees the indications of their progress; he knows the principles which must triumph over many of the evils



he laments; he estimates and rejoices in their power; and if yet he sees but the brightening dawn, he recollects how lately there was but a doubtful twilight, how long and deep was the night, and how much reason he has to rejoice in a prospect now becoming every moment more radiant with the promise of a glorious day. The Christian sees the probability and the means of human improvement, and he is also peculiarly concerned in the welfare of his fellow-creatures. There may be found those who, provided that they themselves, and those immediately connected with them, are successful in the common pursuits of the world, feel themselves in no degree called upon to trouble themselves about the concerns of others, and would account it extreme folly to make themselves anxious about the prospects of humanity; but these are not, in any proper sense, Christians. The disciple of Jesus, taught "to love his neighbour as himself," "to think not only of his own things, but of the things of others also," and to consider doing good to the extent of his power as one of his most essential duties, cannot but interest himself in the advantages or evils of the condition of his brethren,—cannot but grieve for their afflictions, and delight himself in their improving prospects. To him, the hope which paints the future triumphs of knowledge, freedom, and



virtue, animating him amidst his struggles in their glorious cause, is joy indeed; and well it can requite his anxieties and sacrifices, well it can support him amidst personal disappointments and sufferings. Nor will Religion refuse to acknowledge as her own, a feeling which implies elevation above merely selfish views and worldly pursuits, and which consists in reliance on the final prevalence of her holy and beneficent influences.

But we must hasten to another and peculiarly interesting class of religious hopes—those which relate to future existence and heavenly happiness. Life itself is uncertain and transient. All its enjoyments, as far as they arise from external things, are insecure in their tenure, and apt, in possession, to disappoint the expectations they had excited; and no excellence of character, no acquisitions of knowledge, no energy in useful labours, no ardour of benevolent feelings, can delay the appointed hour of our departure, or dissipate the gloom which hangs around the closing scene.

Called, as we are by our profession, to sacrifice our interests and inclinations in the service of truth and goodness, and to expose ourselves to the scorn and injuries of the wicked—if in this world only we had hope in Christ, our lot would be but gloomy and discouraging. Our best privilege is, that we can look beyond the changes and sorrows

of time, and can confidently anticipate the reward of our sincere endeavours to perform our duty, the removal of our doubts and difficulties, and the joyful termination of all our afflictions, in those unclouded regions of light and bliss, which the Gospel promises make known unto us. Here, though we gratefully acknowledge that there is much to enjoy, we cannot be insensible to the large share of suffering which, in some form, is appointed to most of us. Our present condition does not satisfy us; it is but a variable day in which the sunshine is interchanged with showers—and in the fairest moments there is ever some threatening cloud to watch and dread, so that our spirits would sink without the prospect of a brighter morrow. Through opposition, disappointment, pain, and bereavement, at times all suffering in our persons, in our selfish interests, and in our friendly and social feelings, we all pass to the dark and sad termination of our short journey. And how blessed, then, is the hope, that the trials of life may be used by us as a preparation for the felicity of a far nobler existence, that its afflictions are as nothing compared with the eternal glory which is to follow them! How enchanting are the visions of progressive, but boundless improvement in holiness, piety, and benevolence—in understanding the purposes, and in loving the perfections of the

great Source of all good ! How sweetly soothing is the prospect of re-union with all the lost objects of our affections, where separation is no longer to be dreaded, and no shade of sin or sorrow can darken our intercourse ! Such are the anticipations which the Christian is authorized to entertain. Such are the hopes which familiarly present themselves to his mind, and whose habitual influence is to be traced in his feelings and actions. Let me conclude with a few words on their effects. An obvious effect of the hopes inspired by religion, is to animate our exertions for the attainment of those objects of desire, to which our thoughts are so much directed, and which we indulge the expectation of some time reaching. Whilst he who is persuaded of the utter depravity of his nature, and attaches no importance to anything he can himself do for his salvation, indolently waits the expected influences of Divine grace, the man who has learned to aspire after improvement, and to believe that his wishes may, by his own efforts, be in some degree accomplished, has a constant spur to exertion—he sees before him a goal hung with the glorious rewards of victory, and he puts forth all his strength to prevail in the arduous struggle. As he labours up the steep and slippery ascent, he feels, at every step, that something is accomplished, and sees some point which it may

yet be in his power to reach ; so that he is ever advancing towards perfection, and hoping, that through the holy principles and powerful motives of his Divine religion, he may ultimately attain unto it, in that sense in which it may belong to his nature. In like manner, it is vain to expect energetic labours in the great cause of humanity, but from those who believe that they can effectually contribute to its advancement. If we think that the world is never intended to be better than it is—if we even fear that it is growing worse, our exertions seem thrown away, our spirits sink, and we are unwilling to waste, in a hopeless contest, powers which may, at least, be applied to promote our personal comfort. The powerful opponent of all the evils which afflict mankind, is the man who hopes that their amount may be materially diminished. The active, zealous friend of truth, of freedom, of knowledge, is he who believes that they must prevail ; to whose mind the fair prospect of that happy state, which their influences must produce, is familiar, not as a mere dream of fancy, but as a vista through the clouds which veil futurity—as the sure result of those benevolent labours to which he is devoting his best powers, and to whom the personal sacrifices so often required are overbalanced and turned to pleasure, by the conviction that they cannot be made in vain.

And thus it is, also, that delightful anticipations of heavenly bliss cheer us under those wisely-appointed trials, which would otherwise almost overwhelm us ; thus it is, that even amidst the agony of the parting scene, the certainty of speedy reunion with the objects of our virtuous affections is a balm to our lacerated feelings—and that those who are lost on earth, being considered not as torn from us for ever, but as gone before us to that state on which all our best hopes are fixed—retain their place in our thoughts and affections, and seem to exert a powerful influence in preparing us to join them in their blissful abodes. The hopes of the Christian render him superior to the sufferings and sorrows he is ordained to bear, since they interest him for others, and for himself, in something more important than the passing scene, and carry him forward from pain and disappointment to the sure accomplishment of his best and holiest desires.

It is a very valuable effect of Christian hope upon the character, that by engaging our lively interest in those objects which are most worthy to occupy us, and accustoming us to the contemplation of prospects truly grand and beautiful, it counteracts the influence of those inferior and grovelling pursuits, which are so apt to acquire importance in our eyes ; we cannot have the hopes



which belong to the Christian character, and yet be deceived by the claims of sensual pleasure, or wealth, or worldly ambition, to be *leading* objects of our desires.

We cannot dwell on those anticipations of merely selfish enjoyment and external beauty, which these pursuits hold out to us—whilst we can turn to prospects which delightfully exercise all the noblest powers of the mind, and which embrace the happiness of all our fellow-creatures. We cannot *rest* in the fancied goods of this uncertain state, whilst heaven and eternity open to us their bright scenes, and make our onward path to glow with their reflected radiance.

Thus our minds are refined and spiritualized—we are rendered insensible to the temptations of mere outward and present things, which might otherwise overpower our virtue, and we are prepared for the happiness which we so earnestly desire, and so eagerly anticipate, though we can here form no worthy estimate of its nature or amount.





## THE EDUCATION OF CONSCIENCE.

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HEBREWS v. 14.

“ Those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”

I PROPOSE at once to separate these words from the argument of the writer to the Hebrews, and employ them as an introduction to some observations on the nature of conscience, and the importance of forming and cultivating a quick sense of moral good and evil, which seem to me well deserving of our serious attention.

In opposition to many moralists, I must begin by laying it down as a truth, immediately leading to valuable practical results, that the inward feeling of pleasure and self-approbation at what is good in our conduct, and of dissatisfaction, self-reproach, and remorse at what is evil, which we call *conscience*, is not born with us, or a fixed part of our nature, entitled to be accounted the voice of God within us, but is altogether produced by the operation of circumstance, habit, and education, on the simple elements of our intellectual and moral being.

We hear from some a great deal about what they call the *moral sense*, which they conceive of as an original innate power of distinguishing between virtue and vice, with a disposition to approve the one and blame the other—so that a man has but to follow the dictates of nature and conscience, and he must act rightly. He always has an inward warning to his duty: he has but to listen to and obey the silent monitor, and he cannot err. This system is, to be sure, sufficiently removed from that which represents man as naturally disposed to evil, and averse from all good (though, strange to say, they appear to have been maintained in conjunction); but it might be difficult to decide which of the two is most opposed to fact and experience; and if the one claim pre-eminence in evil tendency, the other seems to me very far from the praise of judiciously encouraging and promoting what is good.

If we have within us any natural perception of the beauty of virtue and the odiousness of vice; if conscience really possess the power often attributed to it, of absolutely directing us to our duty, I would inquire how it happens that different individuals, equally obedient to the dictates of conscience, equally under the guidance of their moral sense, have come to opposite conclusions on very important points of practical morality?

There unquestionably exists, in society at large, a general disposition to approve virtue and condemn vice, which has been found, with certain considerable modifications, in all ages and in all countries, being accounted for by the similarity in the constitution and general circumstances of human beings; and the appearance of this sense of right and wrong at a very early age, which is really the consequence of the position in which we are placed in respect to those older than us, and of what we hear and see around us, has caused it to be hastily ascribed to instinct. But the objection we have stated is fatal to this doctrine. Did any such thing exist as an instinctive and innate moral sense, it must necessarily be universal and uniform; but the contrary we know to be the fact. How differently do the consciences of well-meaning, and, on the whole, virtuous men, decide on some points! The moral sense of whole nations has approved of the exposure of infants, of polygamy, of concubinage, incest, and slavery; and the moral sense of all nations, taken as general bodies, yet approves of war, an evil as much opposed to the spirit of true religion, and enlightened benevolence, as any we have mentioned—one which, we trust to the Providence of God and the power of the Gospel, that future ages will avoid and detest. The very dictates of conscience have,

in innumerable instances, led to acts of cruelty and injustice; and that which is called the voice of God has forced men, against their better feelings, to sacrifice their brethren at the shrine of bigotry.

I know it is said that cases such as these manifest the recognition of duty, and the tendency to a moral estimate of actions, whilst the error belongs to a weak understanding, or to an early perversion of the natural sentiments: but if, by instinctive moral sentiments no more be meant than those which are most suitable to the nature of man, and are developed in him in the most favourable circumstances, being intended by his Maker to be thus called forth—this is no more than we all believe, and the apparent difference arises from an improper use of words; and if more be intended, I cannot understand the utility, or even the meaning, of an *instinct* which is constantly liable to be perverted, and which, in practice, affords no sure guidance.

Again, it seems to me that if the moral sense were really instinctive, and of course universal, there could scarcely be thought to be any need of a further revelation of God's will to his creatures; it might, at least, occur to us that he might as well have given all that was required at once and by one method, and no answer could be given to

that objection to revealed religion, which asserts that all its useful and valuable doctrines were universally known before its appearance, and are implanted in us by nature. But we need fear no objection of this kind, for we learn, from a careful study of the constitution of our own minds, that it is “by use men have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil;” and we cannot fail to observe the great importance of religion for *correcting, strengthening, and elevating* that sense of right and wrong, which is produced more or less clearly, in all nations, by the common circumstances of mankind.

It is by *use* that the mariner observes the distant sail, whilst as yet beyond the reach of unpractised sight: by use the naturalist perceives the minute objects of his pursuit, which escape the notice of others, and admires the beauties which they see not: by use the farmer views the changes of the weather in the face of the morning or the evening sky: the mechanic performs with speed and certainty the intricate operations of his art; and the rapid finger of the musician flies over the notes, calling forth, with magic touch, all the powers of harmony. Nor are the effects of habit less certain or less evident with respect to the powers and dispositions of the mind. The more our faculties are exercised, the more their capacity



is enlarged ; the more frequently we apply and act upon any principles, whether good or bad, which we may have adopted, the more fixed do they become, and the stronger is their influence over us ; and the more any dispositions or affections, whether virtuous or vicious, are drawn out and exercised by circumstances, the more powerful and permanent do they become. Nor is this all ; for, though physical causes undoubtedly incline different minds to various qualities and pursuits, as they occasion a difference in sensual propensities, and we are in our bodily structure so far different that, under *the same* circumstances, we should not all act and think alike, yet the great majority of our habits and dispositions, and uniformly those upon which the excellence of the character, and the happiness of the individual, depend, are the result of education, and the circumstances of our situation.

Although a little reflection must make it plain that the causes, even of single actions, are usually too various and complicated to be all distinctly perceived, and that the sources of dispositions and affections must be much more difficult to be fully ascertained, yet, in a great proportion of cases, we can trace the leading points, whether good or bad, in men's characters, to the effects of education and circumstances. With what certainty, for

instance, if we are acquainted with the history of their lives, can we refer to the example or influence of parents and friends, or to some conspicuous early events occurring to them, or peculiarities in their position—the piety, the love of truth, the avarice, or any other virtue or vice which is unequivocal, and may not, in a great measure, proceed from constitutional causes, which we may observe in men's characters. This is one important use of Biography. Since the same circumstances, and the same means, must always have the same tendency, and produce the same general results, we learn, from the lives both of good and wicked men, what situations are to be considered as peculiarly dangerous, and what have been found, by experience, the most efficacious means of virtue.

If we endeavour to analyse, and trace to its sources, any one of those qualities which are accounted virtuous, and which have been generally approved as such in all parts of the world, we may readily see it not to be simple, original, and innate, but the effect of a class of circumstances which has occurred very similarly in all ages and all nations, and to arise from several causes blended together. Let us take, as an example, the filial affection. Those who have been properly brought up, can never remember the time when they did

not esteem it a duty to honour and love their parents ; and all the tribes of men, in every different period of the world, have accounted this a virtue. Hence, certain moral philosophers would tell us, that we have a natural approbation of this virtue ; that we feel within us a call to it ; that a love of it is born with us—and, in short, that the true reason why we *ought* to cultivate it is, because we are prompted to it by conscience. What, then, is to be said of those—for such, undoubtedly, there are—who have never known this virtue ; never felt any approbation of it, and never been reproached by conscience for the neglect of it ? But let us consider the case a little more carefully. What we understand by filial affection is described when we say, that it is made up of love, gratitude, and fear, or reverence. The concurrent existence of these emotions, in different degrees and proportions, according to different cases, would fully account for the phenomena. But love itself means the simple emotion that arises from the actual perception of pleasure, so associated with a particular object or individual that has frequently excited it, as to be very readily called up by the appearance, the name, or any recollection of that object or person. Gratitude is the name we employ to express the same simple, pleasing emotion, being strongly excited in connection with specific benefits

received from an intelligent agent, it being generally included in the notion, that a corresponding desire exists, of conferring pleasure on the object of our gratitude. Fear is the simple emotion arising from the perception of pain, associated with an object which has caused restraint, disappointment, or suffering of any kind; and the word reverence only means a certain amount of fear mingled with admiration and confidence. After this explanation, it must surely be abundantly evident, that filial affection is a complex, not a simple feeling—that its elements are variously mixed in different cases, and that the absence of anything deserving the name, in some cases, is very intelligible. It must, I think, be also clearly perceived, that it is an acquired, not an innate feeling. Love, by its very nature, cannot exist until the same object has repeatedly been a cause of pleasure. All those permanent states, or tendencies of feeling, entering into the character, which we call *affections*, result from the frequent excitement of particular emotions. The very name of gratitude implies the consciousness of benefits conferred, and fear can only be understood as the effect of the sense of superior power, and of instances of restraint, privation, and even the infliction of suffering, united with the preponderating amount of kindness and fondness. The

necessarily dependent state of children, the love which they call forth, and which is so abundantly exercised towards them, and the restraints or inflictions which the convenience or the temper of parents, and a regard to their own good, causes them to suffer, must create the mingled feelings which constitute filial affection, and supply the complete explanation of it, although, on a hasty view, it might appear a simple and distinct feeling—and since its sources are common to most human beings, we cannot wonder at its being almost universally felt. Now, in respect to what may be called its *moral* character, it must be observed, that the manifestations of this affection are encouraged, received with evident pleasure, and warmly returned, and that the child learns from the first dawn of reason, by means of expressions or signs of approbation, to connect with them the idea of *right*. In the same way, the notion of *wrong* is associated with the contrary conduct. The lesson is learned before that period to which our memories can go back—and, therefore, we seem to ourselves to have derived it from nature. We have no recollection of the time when disobedience to our parents did not occasion us the painful feelings of a reproving conscience; therefore, we are ready to imagine that such a time never was, and falsely assume that principles



are innate, the origin of which is lost to us, though a little cautious examination might enable us to see their formation in others. Such is a sketch of the history of one of those feelings which unite to make up what is called the moral sense. Some of them may be more easily analysed; and the general result, I think, would be, that none of them has any other origin than in education and circumstances.

Having thus attempted to establish the principles that conscience and the sense of right and wrong are not inherent and unchangeable parts of our nature, but produced by instruction and experience acting on our external condition, and strengthened by reflection, observation, the discipline of life, and above all by *practice*, I proceed to observe as a consequence, that according to the manner in which they have been brought up, and the situation in which they have been placed, different individuals have their sense of moral good and evil cultivated to very different degrees, and in proportion with its acuteness and correctness will be the probability of their acting rightly in circumstances of difficulty and trial. Hence the importance to all of having a correct moral taste, early formed by education, and refined and strengthened by mature reflection, by the diligent and frequent consideration of the pre-



cepts of religion, and by the habit of constantly acting in conformity with its dictates.

The perfection of the moral sense consists in its leading us to approve of those actions and affections only, which tend to our real and ultimate happiness ; but it may be misled by education or by the error of our own judgment. It often is misled, so as to sanction what is wrong : we have therefore no infallible internal guide, and must never think our sense of right and wrong too strong or too clear to be improved.

From these considerations we plainly see the duty of endeavouring to cultivate and enlighten the moral sense, both in ourselves and others, so that the dictates of conscience may be founded in reason, and may tend to good. If we content ourselves with what we have received from education, we may retain pernicious errors as principles of action, whereas by diligently directing our attention to moral subjects, and applying ourselves to the best source of information, the Holy Scriptures, we may gradually have our senses exercised to a better discernment between good and evil, and may in many important particulars improve our moral perceptions. We have the power of serving others in the same manner, by communicating the truths we consider ourselves as having discovered, and we are bound to do so by the law

of benevolence. Nor is it sufficient for us to endeavour to acquire and diffuse correct notions of what is right ; for in informing the mind, and directing the judgment, we only lay a good foundation. It is only by diligent examination of the motives and quality of our actions, and long continued practice, carefully conformed to our principles, that a moral sensibility is formed, which may be safely trusted to as a rule of life—which will instantaneously recognize and admire what is good—detest and abhor what is evil. To have the mental senses thus trained by practice to the ready and accurate distinction of moral good and evil, without a continual reference to principles, is the perfection of virtue, and is the happiness and reward of the advanced Christian. It is indeed only he who has long been endeavouring to imbibe the purest principles of morals, and has carefully studied to regulate his actions in conformity with them, who can with safety trust to his moral sense, as a sufficient guide for his conduct : nevertheless that moral sense which is common nearly to all, because it is the effect of circumstances, in which most of our race partake, that especially which may be expected to prevail in countries where Christianity is known, and where it has influenced in some degree, however imperfectly, public opinion, must be considered as highly

favourable to virtue, and as a useful guide to the conduct. Only he who desires to adorn his Christian profession must by no means rest satisfied with it, but must adopt proper means to correct, refine, and strengthen it.

In conclusion, the principles we have laid down, lead us to a very striking view of the importance of a pious and virtuous education. That moral sensibility which should lead us through life to reject evil and approve of what is good, begins to be formed in early childhood, by the instructions we receive, and still more by our observations on the conduct and sentiments of those around us. It is made up of a variety of judgments respecting the tendency of certain lines of conduct to procure us, at first, the esteem of others, and in its most perfect state, the approbation of God and our own real happiness.

These judgments or opinions respecting the excellence of different modes of acting are in childhood taken almost exclusively from parental authority, and from what we perceive to be thought by those older than ourselves. If then parents are not careful both themselves to act and speak in accordance with the rules of virtue and the sentiments of honour and religion, and to guard their children from all corrupting influences proceeding from others, they run a most serious risk of having

the consciences of their children misled and their moral taste perverted. Whilst by a caution and diligence such as the importance of the object requires, it is in their power to form the tender mind to a love of all that is excellent, and a distaste for whatever is evil in its character. Those who at first only condemn actions and principles as wrong, because they have always heard them condemned and seen them avoided by those whom they love and honour, will gradually "by use have their senses exercised to discern" for themselves "both good and evil;" will become familiar with their properties, and come to value or dislike them from their own clear perceptions of the advantage of the one and the bad results of the other; whilst children whose moral feelings have been trusted to as instinctive, or left to be formed by the accidental influences of circumstances, will at best draw them only from popular sentiment, and can rise no higher than the average morality of the world—very probably may derive them from wicked and depraved characters with whom they may associate. If parents desire for their children a really superior character, they must take care that the first impressions may be favourable to virtue, that the first habits and affections formed may be good and amiable; they will then hardly

be disappointed in seeing their children lovers of goodness, nice in discriminating, and steady in practising what is right.

## THE PROGRESSIVE AND THE PERMANENT IN CHRISTIANITY.

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HEBREWS xiii. 8.

“Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.”

THESE, in which we live, are spirit-stirring and mind-awakening times ; men are no longer content to abide by the old land-marks, to receive the sentiments as contentedly as they do the properties of their forefathers, or to listen to the cry of alarm with which their interested shepherds would deter them from wandering beyond the permitted pastures and prescribed boundaries of thought. Every thing is examined, every opinion finds a defender, and some bold adventurer is ever ready to attack what has been held most venerable and sacred, or to raise up some new edifice of speculation, which often turns out to be but the wood, hay, and stubble of human weakness.

Certainly, however, this state of things must have a tendency to promote the diffusion of truth, which can only advance by inquiry, and which is



finally to prevail by overcoming in a fair contest all the powers of error and darkness.

The state really to be dreaded is that in which all is calm and silent; in which an established creed is either submissively and blindly believed, or professed amidst concealed unbelief and the entire absence of all guiding principle.

When we know rightly we can act wisely, and the more freedom there is of examination, the better is our chance of obtaining knowledge. We ought not then to be alarmed or displeased at variety of sentiment, or to encourage any unkind or disdainful feelings towards those who differ from us most widely; but we ought to be excited to deliberate and cautious investigation, resolving that we will neither ignorantly and stupidly tread the old ways, nor allow ourselves to be drawn aside into new paths without careful consideration and satisfactory assurance that we are changing for the better.

In the present day, though the profession of Christianity is so general as almost to seem a matter of course, we can by no means judge from its extent of the number of those who have really weighed the evidences of divine religion and embraced its truths from conviction, as the proper guides of their lives. Many we are sure only receive what circumstances have caused to be

taught them, and those who think most are apt to give the reins to fancy instead of following the leadings of evidence.

We stand in the midst of an extraordinary variety of opinion. Christianity must be to us very vague and ill-defined, unless we will take pains to settle what it is, and what claims it has upon us.

Are all matters of opinion indifferent? Is Christianity intended to present itself, like the chameleon, in ever-changing colours, adapting itself to the tastes and intellects of different classes of professors? Is there an unchanging creed, the adoption of which is absolutely necessary, or is the religion to take its tone from the age, and be moulded anew by every aspiring innovator who adds or lays aside according to his notions of human wants?

These questions demand our attention. The Christian minister is bound to give his best assistance towards their satisfactory solution, but if he rightly estimates his own position he will do so in the spirit of investigation, not of dictation. If we would well understand the religion of Jesus Christ we must study its records. There is no rival authority in any existing man or body of men, in any ecclesiastical or civil rulers, in any writings of a later although still a remote age, or in any tra-

ditions, which *might* at least have originated in fraud or superstition. Rational Christianity is based on the right of private judgment and the sufficiency of the Scriptures. These principles I pretend not to prove: I may on this occasion safely assume them, but they also are liable to be abused, and must be properly guarded. No doubt their adoption in a certain sense has caused the sectarian division of Protestantism and the fanatical excesses into which many have been betrayed. Add, however, the cautions, that immediate Divine guidance is not, in these days, to be supposed; that our *right* is not a right to adopt any fancy of our own, but to use our best judgment in ascertaining the meaning of the sacred records; that in all cases they *have* a definite meaning, which may be determined, more or less certainly, by a regard to fixed and well-established rules of interpretation; and that our business is to put ourselves in the situation of the original writers and readers, so as to ascertain the true meaning, in order to make application of the principles to our altered circumstances,—not to take every sentence as addressed to ourselves, and bearing on our modern controversies.

With due attention to these just and reasonable laws, it must be manifest to every one that the tendency of inquiry must be to discover the actual

truth, and that, consequently, though the principle of private judgment may at first seem only to cause that multiplicity of sects which is the reproach of Protestantism, it must, by further and better application, produce approximation of opinion and ultimate agreement on the most important points.

If Christianity be true—and if not, disinterested inquiry will show us the failure of its evidence, and justify our rejection of its authority—if it be true, the exercise of reason and thought must cause it to be gradually better understood and better applied, and as a consequence must lead to its wider diffusion in the world. This is a part of its nature and of the plan of Providence respecting its influences. When it was given, it was capable of producing most important effects, but not all its designed effects. It is a *progressive* system, and the declaration of our text, so strikingly expressive of permanence, is in no degree opposed to this idea. Let us dwell a little on those views of our religion in which we must recognise, and shall find it important to attend to, its progressive character, that we may thereby the better perceive to what the quality of permanence belongs, and how the consideration of it should affect our minds. I will first refer to the gradual influence of Gospel principles on individual Christians. Who

does not perceive that the way in which we are to receive the benefit of religion is by a constant growth in religious knowledge in all Christian graces, and in whatever belongs to the spirit of our holy faith? We could not fall into a much more dangerous error than to suppose that having once become disciples of Jesus, and regularly performing certain duties as such, we may rest satisfied with our condition, and account ourselves safe without efforts to improve it. We are too frail and weak not to need daily efforts to restrain our evil propensities and correct our faults, yet we cannot honestly devote ourselves to this important work, without feeling that by the blessing of God on our sincere endeavours and on the varied discipline of life, we are advancing towards the mark—improving continually in the qualities which become our profession.

Our powers are too feeble and limited for any of us to pretend at once to discern all the beauty and excellence of the holy doctrine we receive. We know that we must study it more and more, that a rational faith may be confirmed, that mistakes may be corrected, more enlarged views obtained, and new truths brought to light.

The true Christian is ever, as the sacred poet represents the pilgrims passing through scenes of desolation in going up to worship God in



his temple, "going on from strength to strength." He proceeds with increasing light and vigour, he ever aims at higher attainments. He climbs a hill, he fights a battle, he runs a race, he tills the ground for a future harvest, he seeks a better country, even an heavenly, and whilst he remains here, he refuses to be satisfied with what he knows, what he is or what he has done; for his business in this world is to prepare himself by constant improvement for a better state to come.

And does not this progressive character belong as strikingly to the effects produced by Christianity on human society? It was one purpose of the Mission of Christ to bring to an end the temporary and limited dispensation of Judaism; to spiritualize religion, and give it a higher power, a more effectual sanction, and a wider extension. Yet Jesus lived and died a Jew, an observer of the Mosaic Law, and recommending to his disciples to attend to its requisitions, though not to the neglect of better things. Christianity was soon, and by the inevitable operation of its precepts, to put an end to Slavery within the immediate sphere of its influence, yet it recognised it as an existing institution, and taught the duty of obedience to masters. The Gospel spirit is one of the purest and most generous freedom. It justifies as it tends to produce every rational improvement in Government and



social institutions, since they all are founded in the sense of human brotherhood, and the desire to promote diffused happiness; yet Christ and his Apostles obeyed and taught others to obey the government under which they lived, suffered patiently injuries for which there was no legal remedy, and trusted to the progress of better principles for a gradual improvement in what is so important to the interests of humanity. War is essentially Anti-Christian; nothing can be more opposed to our Lord's precepts and spirit, nothing can be more strikingly at variance with everything that should distinguish his followers. Yet the military profession is not in the Gospel denounced as unlawful, nor is any other opposition raised to an evil inevitable in those times than by quietly but decisively laying down principles with the application of which war could not subsist.

The Gospel is glad tidings of great joy for *all* nations, yet it has hitherto made itself heard but by a limited portion of the human race, and even to them it could not have extended, had not a veil of corruptions prevented their being dazzled and repulsed by the splendour of its purity. Christianity has produced its best effects gradually, and if it be indeed a divine religion, it has greater and far better things yet to accomplish for the children of men.

According to this view of our religion, many of its beauties and some of its most sublime and ennobling truths have been partially concealed by a morning mist of error rising from the soil of human imperfection, and gradually to be dissipated before the strengthening rays of the Sun of Righteousness. A true perception of the plan of Providence should prepare and reconcile us to see what we deem error prevailing for a time, whilst it should encourage our confident expectation of the ultimate triumph of truth, and call forth our best exertions in a spirit of pious and benevolent zeal to promote it.

One other view of the progressive character of our religion must not be omitted. It is no dry system of truths to be implicitly believed, but an intellectual and spiritual faith, which, though it resists every destructive influence, when submitted in the crucible of a strong mind to the furnace-flame of earnest thought, gives forth valuable products, which had not previously been detected. The written word does not convey to us the whole of Christianity: the meditations of the good and wise will draw forth subjects for admiration and reflection previously unknown. There are doctrines capable of satisfying, improving, and consoling the best minds, which form no part of the direct teachings of Christ or his immediate fol-

lowers, but which may, by the application of reason, be derived from the unquestionable teachings of the New Testament, with a clearness and certainty that render them truly important and edifying. We are not to receive Christianity as giving us, in its actual records, all the information on religious subjects which we are capable of possessing, or ought to desire, but as affording us materials, by the proper use of which we may erect for ourselves a beautiful structure of truth and Divine knowledge, as the home of our souls, cherishing our best affections, and educating us for the heaven to which our hopes are directed.

It is at least very doubtful whether anything merely external in Christianity has a fixed and permanent character. Forms of worship may differ in different places and periods. Ceremonies may be deemed useful for a time, and may be changed, or pass away. Churches, like empires, may rise and fall, but the spirit of the Gospel may remain; poured forth like a stream from a fountain, it may enliven itself, by its contests with the obstacles it encounters, deposit, in its later course, the impurities it had taken up, and at length roll along calmly and brightly, to refresh and fertilize the world, and develop all the germs of good which the Almighty hand has implanted in the nature of man.

Thus we perceive in what manner, and to what extent, a Divine religion may be progressive and changeable in its character, and we find it in no degree the less true, that "Jesus Christ"—his doctrine, the system which, in his Father's name, he established—"is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever."

It is the same, for what is once true must be so always. If Jesus was authorized by God, and delivered what he in an extraordinary manner received from Him, proving his claim to authority "by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did by him," in the presence of many people, then the truth of Christianity is a fact over which the revolutions of time have no power. A blessing has been conferred upon the world; its evidence has been exhibited and duly recorded, and no changing opinions or feelings of the generations of mortals can erase the events from the roll of time, or detract from their claims on our respectful attention. Recorded evidence, possessing in itself the essential marks of goodness, loses nothing of its value by the transmission of the record. We are always willing to examine the questions whether the books of Scripture come to us with sufficient proofs of antiquity and genuineness, and whether it sufficiently appears, from the nature of the documents, that their contents are worthy of

credence. Assuming, as we must be permitted here to do, the affirmative, neither the progress of time, nor the different tastes and self-imagined wants of individuals, make any alteration in the state of the question. It is not for us to judge God's method of dealing, but to endeavour to understand it well, that we may humbly accept and profit by it. The same laws of evidence, founded in the constitution of our minds, are good for all time. We strive to know them, and steadily and faithfully to apply them. There is nothing inconceivable in our finding out, that a long-cherished belief is inconsistent with them. As fallible mortals, we can but abandon error when we discover it. But the theory that the alleged evidence of Divine revelation was good for its age, and was employed by God to convince the first believers, but is not good for more enlightened times, and has now lost all its force, is a theory so entirely irreconcilable with just views, both of human nature and of Divine Providence, that it is needless to enlarge on its condemnation.

No doubt the errors, weaknesses, and even crimes of men are made by our Almighty Ruler, instruments for promoting his purposes, but they are not directly and in an extraordinary way sanctioned by him. That which is properly meant by Revelation, and to which, if words have any mean-



ing, Christ and his apostles laid claim, offering what they alleged as sufficient proofs, which now remain for our consideration, must be either true or false,—and if the latter, no mixture of good we may perceive in it ought to secure for it our respect. But *we* believe it true, and in doing so we believe it unchangeable, “the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.”

Again, the distinguishing doctrines and characteristic features of Christianity admit of no change with the progress of time. They may be applied under different circumstances, and more or less completely; they must be viewed by different individuals in different lights; they may be more fully traced out into their consequences, and made to yield new, and, in some particulars, unexpected results; but the essential principles remain always the same. The religion preserves its identity and its characteristic qualities. It is fitted to produce the same spirit now which it produced in its earliest days. Never has the spirit of the world risen up to persecute it, but it has offered its array of martyrs and confessors; never has it ceased to send forth its preachers ready to face all difficulties, and make all sacrifices, that they might recommend its doctrines; never has it failed to exercise a gentle and humanizing influence on society, to strengthen the soul against temptation, to soothe



the sorrows of the mourner, and to point the hopes of frail and dying man to heaven and eternity. The world will grow better, for Christianity will be better understood and more thoroughly felt, but the religion does not change, it only gradually works its way into the minds and hearts of men, thus carrying onward its own destined work by its own inherent power. Christianity is holiness and love, sincerity, purity, piety, and heavenly hope. It is seen in the life and teachings of Jesus, it breathes in the letters of his chosen friends, and whilst these things are known, it suffers no change.

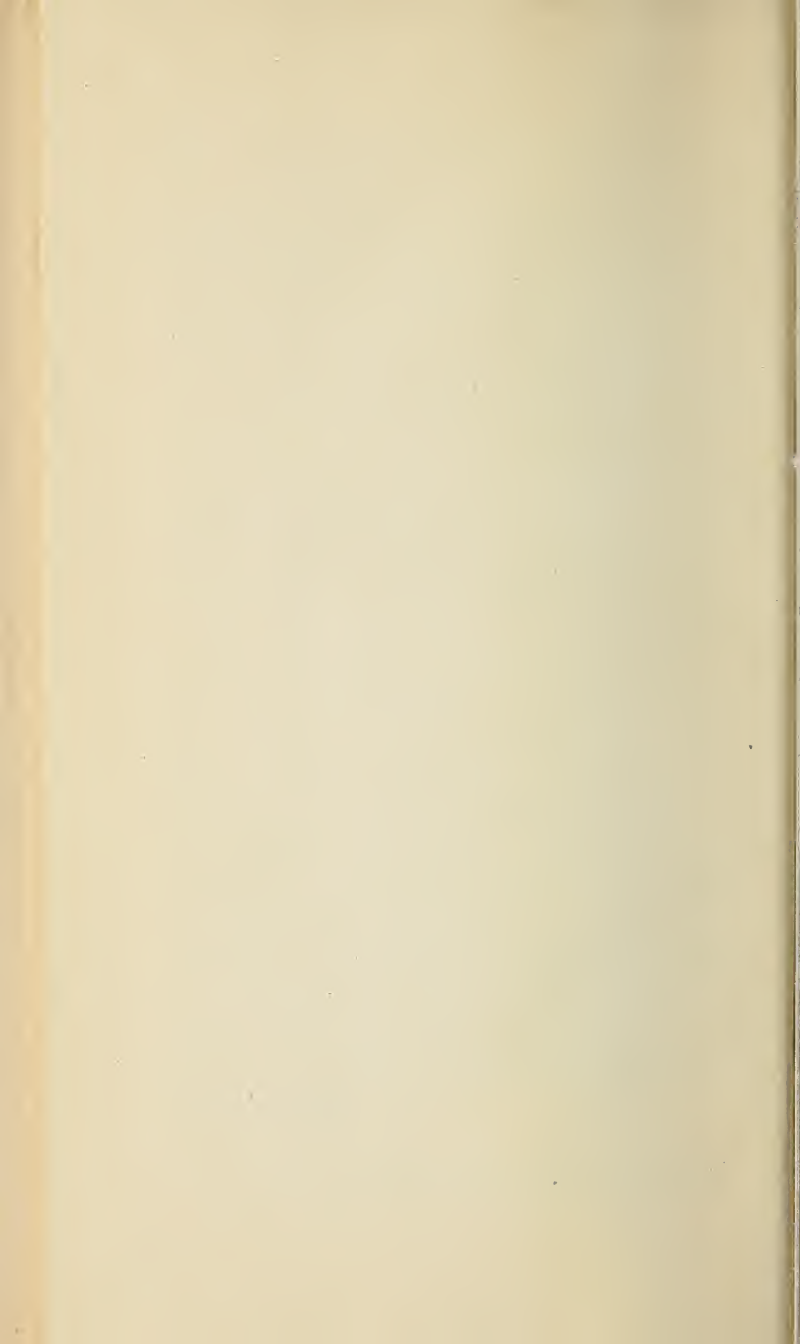
The world was intended to advance and improve. All the dispensations of Divine religion claim to have been the means of that advancement. The earlier ones were dispensations for children: they were necessarily carnal, and therefore temporary. Christianity is purely spiritual, and therefore independent of changes in manners, arts, laws, and degrees of knowledge. To what is evil it is always an antagonist power. Every thing that is good is but the fuller application of its principles. We can desire nothing for man which, in perceiving it to be good, we do not also perceive to belong to Christianity. It goes on slowly diffusing its influences, and all the flowers of hope and joy spring up in its path as the roses bloomed

before the fabled goddess of the spring. Christian faith is the noblest principle of human action—the living fountain of pure affections, beneficent exertions, and high aspirations—it is the strength of our souls during the days of our earthly pilgrimage—it is our guide to the mansions of bliss of which it gives us the assurance. And ages may roll on in their course of improvement. The early dawn, which we now hail, of truth and freedom and love, may brighten into the full day, and more than all that our hopes anticipate may be realised for future generations of men. Still, higher intellect and purer minds will acknowledge with grateful joy Jesus Christ as the teacher and example of holiness, the leader and perfecter of faith. Still, his Gospel will give the principles of virtue and the inspiration of benevolence, and his promise and resurrection will enable mortals to triumph over death. Still, every new blessing will be felt to be a fresh development of Christian morals, and if war has then ceased to desolate the globe,—if commerce diffuses its blessings unrestricted by a blind and miscalculating selfishness,—if labour moderates its demands on the time, and is honoured in its happy sons,—if freedom smiles around, and tyranny and corruption are no longer known,—if no claim is any more heard to property in a brother's blood and

sinews, and difference of colour or feature is not thought to take away the privilege of humanity,—if virtue forms the mind, conscience controls the baser passions, knowledge employs and improves the powers, and human society rises above what now we dare even to hope,—all this can be only because Christianity shall then be more believed, understood, and practised, than it has yet been—because the reign of the Prince of Peace shall be established, and the same religion which we honour and love shall be diffused in its purity and power amongst those who then occupy this earthly scene.

In the day of its highest and widest influence, Christianity will be the same as before it had passed the narrow limits of Judea; and when its true disciples from all nations, kindreds, and tongues, meet in their Father's house above, they will unite in a purer expression of grateful praise unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, on account of those very truths and influences which now cheer and animate us in our struggles with temptation and evil, and bless us with glorious hopes for the race of man, and for our own condition when death shall have opened to us the portals of eternity, and this mortal shall have put on immortality.









Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process.  
Neutralizing agent: Magnesium Oxide  
Treatment Date: May 2006

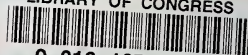
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